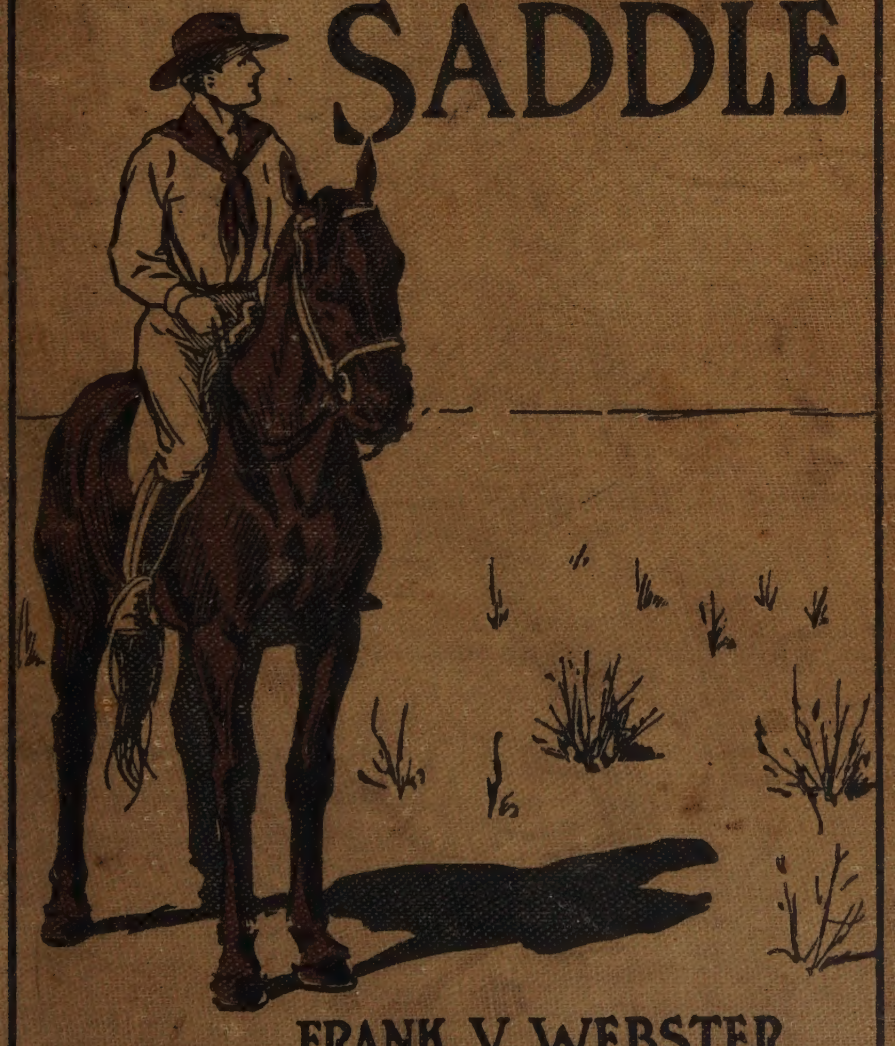
COMRADES OF THE SADDLE



FRANK V. WEBSTER

"THE BOY TURNED TO FLEE, AND STUMBLED."

Page 79.

COMRADES OF THE SADDLE

Or

The Young Rough Riders of the Plains

BY

FRANK V. WEBSTER

AUTHOR OF "ONLY A FARM BOY," "THE YOUNG TREASURE HUNTER," "THE BOYS OF BELLWOOD SCHOOL," "TOM THE TELEPHONE BOY," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK
CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY

BOOKS FOR BOYS

By FRANK V. WEBSTER

ONLY A FARM BOY
Or Dan Hardy's Rise in Life
TOM THE TELEPHONE BOY
Or The Mystery of a Message
THE BOY FROM THE RANCH
Or Roy Bradner's City Experiences
THE YOUNG TREASURE HUNTER
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THE NEWSBOY PARTNERS
Or Who Was Dick Box?
THE BOY PILOT OF THE LAKES
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TWO BOY GOLD MINERS
Or Lost in the Mountains
JACK THE RUNAWAY
Or On the Road with a Circus
THE BOYS OF BELLWOOD SCHOOL
Or Frank Jordan's Triumph
COMRADES OF THE SADDLE
Or The Young Rough Riders of the Plains

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	An Exciting Escape	1
II	Mr. Alden Brings News	7
III	Word from the West	14
IV	Gus Megget	22
V	The Half-moon Ranch	34
VI	In the Saddle	44
VII	A Race in the Moonlight	55
VIII	Horace in Danger	67
IX	The Message from Cross-eyed Pete	81
X	The Return to the Ranch	93
XI	Preparations for Pursuit	106
XII	What Nails Learned	112
XIII	Out on the Plains	121
XIV	Another Discovery	129
XV	The Contested Trail	136
XVI	What Jeffreys Knew	142
XVII	Lost!	150
XVIII	A Mysterious Call	158

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
XIX	A Terrible Plot	164
XX	The Prairie Fire	171
XXI	A Ride for Life	177
XXII	Lawrence's Plan	183
XXIII	In the Mountains	188
XXIV	Capturing the Cattle Thieves	194
XXV	Homeward	201

COMRADES OF THE SADDLE

CHAPTER I

AN EXCITING ESCAPE

TWILIGHT was settling on the land. The forms of trees and houses loomed big and black, their sharp outlines suggesting fanciful forms to the minds of two boys hurrying along the road which like a ribbon wound in and out among the low hills surrounding the town of Bramley, in southwestern Ohio.

As the darkness increased lights began to twinkle from the windows of the distant farmhouses.

"We're later than usual, Tom," said the larger of the two boys. "I hope we'll get home before father does."

"Then let's hurry. The last time we kept supper waiting he said we'd have to give up playing ball after school if we couldn't get home before meal time."

"And that means that we won't make the team and will only get a chance to substitute," returned the first speaker.

As though such a misfortune were too great to be borne, the two young ball players broke into a dog trot.

The boys were brothers, Tom and Larry Alden. Larry, the larger, was sixteen and Tom was a year younger. Both were healthy and strong and would have been thought older, so large were they.

The only children of Theodore Alden, a wealthy farmer who lived about three miles from Bramley, unlike many brothers, they were chums. They were prime favorites, and their popularity, together with their natural ability and cool-headedness at critical moments, made them leaders in all sports.

As it grew darker and darker, the brothers quickened their pace. Talking was out of the question, so fast were they going. But as they rounded a turn in the road, which enabled them to see the lights in their home, a quarter of a mile away, Larry gasped:

"There's no light in the dining-room yet. Father hasn't gotten home!"

"Come on then for a final spurt," returned Tom.

Willingly Larry responded, and the boys dashed forward as though they were just starting out instead of ending a two-mile run.

On the right-hand side of the road a fringe of bushes hedged a swamp.

The patter of the boys' feet on the hard clay road was the only sound that broke the stillness.

Their goal, with the bright lights shining from the windows, was only about three hundred yards away when suddenly from the direction of the swamp sounded a sullen snarl.

"Did you hear anything?" asked Larry.

"I thought so."

As though to settle all doubt, the growl rang out again. This time it was nearer and sounded more ominous.

For a moment the boys looked at each other, then, as with one accord, turned their heads and looked in the direction whence the startling noise had come.

Just as they did so there came another howl, and an instant later a big black form, for all the world like a large dog, leaped from the bushes into the road.

"Quick, quick!" cried Larry, seizing his brother's arm and pulling him along, for Tom had slackened his speed, as though fascinated by the sight of the strange animal. "It must be that wolf father read about, the one that got away when the circus train was passing through Husted."

And Larry was right. The animal was indeed a wolf that had escaped from its cage through the door, the fastener on which had been jarred out of place by the motion of the train, and had leaped to liberty.

The circus people had reported the loss as soon as it had been discovered and it had been duly announced in the papers.

Mr. Alden had read about it, but all had laughed at the thought of a wolf in placid Ohio and dismissed the story as a circus man's joke.

Rejoicing in its freedom, the beast had wandered about till it struck the swamp and now the air brought to its keen nose the scent of the boys passing. Ravenously hungry, the wolf hastened toward the lads.

As it bounded into the road the glare from the lights of the farmhouse momentarily blinded it and it stood blinking.

But only for an instant. Instinctively realizing that it must catch them before they reached the

lights, the wolf uttered a savage snarl and bounded forward.

Larry's words to his brother had roused the boy, and together they were racing toward the welcome lights of their home.

But the wolf with its leaps covered three yards to their one, and as the older of the boys looked over his shoulder he saw that the beast was gaining on them.

Fifty yards ahead was the house and thirty yards behind them was the wolf.

Well did the boys know they could not win the race. But they did not lose their heads.

"Father! Harry!" yelled Larry. "Joe! The wolf! the wolf! Get the rifle!"

"The wolf! the wolf!" added Tom. "Shoot the wolf!"

The yells, breaking the stillness of the night, startled Mrs. Alden and the hired men, who were awaiting the coming of Mr. Alden and the boys.

Unable to distinguish the words, the hired men rushed to the door and threw it open. Peering along the path of the light, they saw the forms of the boys.

"Quick! The rifle! The wolf's after us!" shouted Tom.

Fortunately Mr. Alden always kept a loaded

rifle on a rack on the kitchen wall with which to shoot foxes that attempted to raid his hen-roost.

Hastily the hired man named Joe sprang for the weapon, seized it and dashed from the door, shouting:

"Where is it? Where is it?"

Before the boys could answer, however, his keen eyes espied the black form.

Joe had often amused himself shooting at a target with Larry and Tom and was able to make four bull's-eyes out of five, but never before had the opportunity to aim at a live mark come to him, and as he raised the rifle his hands trembled.

"Shoot! shoot!" yelled Larry. "No matter if you don't hit it, shoot!"

Bang! went the gun, and as the report of the firearm died away the wolf was seen to stagger and fall. Soon the beast arose again, but by that time the hired man was ready for another shot. This finished the beast, and with a yelp it rolled over and breathed its last.

CHAPTER II

MR. ALDEN BRINGS NEWS

EXHAUSTED by their run and the excitement of their escape, Larry and Tom staggered into the house and dropped into chairs, their mother and the hired men pressing about and plying them with questions. But it was several minutes before the boys recovered their breath sufficiently to speak.

Tom was the first to get over his fright, and, as soon as he could control his voice, gave a vivid account of their attempt to reach home before their father, their hearing the uncanny sound from the swamp, the sudden appearance of the wolf behind them and their desperate race to get to the house before the beast should overtake them.

"It's a good thing I practiced shooting last winter," exclaimed Joe as the story ended. He was proud of what he had accomplished.

"There's father," declared Mrs. Alden as a "whoa!" sounded from the yard.

Quickly Larry picked up a lantern, and, followed by all but his mother, went out to help unhitch the horses and take them into the barn.

"What's been going on?" demanded the farmer as the others joined him. "I heard the rifle shot."

Eagerly they all started to tell.

"Don't all speak at once," interposed Mr. Alden. "You're talking so loud and so fast I can't understand a word. Tom, suppose you explain?"

Excitedly the youngest of the brothers poured forth the tale.

"A wolf in Bramley, eh? Well, well! It's a good thing you boys were so near home. This is sure a great day for happenings. My sons get chased into their own dooryard and I——"

But as though to arouse their curiosity, the farmer did not finish his sentence.

"You what?" asked Larry.

"Never mind now. Put the horses up. You won't have to feed them; they're too hot. Give them a little hay and then come in to supper."

Knowing it was useless to try to get their father to satisfy their curiosity, for Mr. Alden, though a kindly man, was what his neighbors called "set in his ways," Tom and Larry ran to the barn to open the door, while the hired men followed with the horses.

After rubbing the animals down and giving them some hay, the four returned to the house.

But not until the supper was finished did the farmer deign to impart his news. Then, tilting back in his chair, he looked at his wife and asked:

"How would you like to take the boys to Scotland for the summer, ma?"

"To Scotland?" repeated Mrs. Alden, as though scarcely believing her ears. "Theodore Alden, are you going crazy? What are you talking about?"

"About going to Scotland," answered the farmer, grinning. "And I'm not crazy."

At the mention of the trip, Larry and Tom looked at their parent and then at each other in dismay, for they had planned a different sort of way for spending the summer. But their attention was quickly drawn to their father again.

"I've got to go to Scotland and we might as well all go," he was saying. "The hired men can run the farm for the summer."

Lapsing into silence as he watched the effect of his words, Mr. Alden enjoyed the looks of surprise and curiosity, then continued:

"When I got to Bramley this morning I found a letter from a man named Henry Sargent, a Glasgow lawyer. He said my uncle, Thomas Darwent, had died, leaving me the only heir to his estates.

Just how much money this means I don't know. He said it might be ten thousand pounds."

"Phew! that's fifty thousand dollars," interposed Larry, excitedly.

"Just so," returned his father. "It may be more. I can't make out whether that's the amount of cash or if that's what it will come to when the land and houses are sold."

"You can write and find out," suggested Mrs. Alden.

"I can write, but I doubt if I can find out," chuckled the farmer. "Those lawyer chaps use such high-sounding words, you can't tell what they mean. If Uncle Darwent made me his heir, I'm going to see I get all there is to get. No Scotchman is going to cheat Theodore Alden out of what's his. Soon's I'd made up my mind to that, I drove over to Olmsted and made arrangements to sail from New York on Saturday."

"Saturday? Why that's only three days off!" protested Mrs. Alden.

"Well, it'll only take a night and part of a day to get to New York. That'll give you a day and a half to get ready, ma."

The thought of a trip to Scotland delighted Mrs. Alden, and she immediately began to plan

how she could get the boys, her husband and herself ready in such a short space of time.

But Larry and Tom showed no signs of enthusiasm.

Noticing their silence, their father exclaimed:

"Don't you boys want to go? I never knew you so quiet before when a trip was mentioned."

"But the ball game with Husted is on Saturday," said Larry, giving voice to the thought uppermost in his mind. Then, as though he realized that it was foolish to compare a trip to Scotland with a game of baseball, he added: "Besides, Tom and I were planning—that is, we were going to ask you if we couldn't go out to Tolopah and spend the summer with Horace and Bill Wilder on their ranch."

With this announcement of a plan which the brothers had discussed over and over, wondering how they could bring it about, the boys anxiously watched their father's face.

"So that's how the wind blows, eh?" he commented. "Well, ma, what do you say? Shall we take the boys with us or let them go to the ranch?"

With her quiet mother's eye Mrs. Alden caught the appeal on her sons' faces and after a short deliberation replied:

"I think they'd be better off with the Wilders—that is, if they'd like to have the boys visit them."

"Hooray! hooray!" cried the boys together.

"We can telegraph and ask Mr. Wilder to-night," said Larry. "Can we go to Bramley and send the message, father?"

"You can telephone the message to the station and the operator will send it."

And while the boys puzzled over the wording of the telegram, their father re-read his letter from Scotland.

"I've got the telegram ready," Tom exclaimed presently. "Listen." And picking up the piece of paper on which he had been scribbling he read:

"BILL AND HORACE WILDER,

"Tolopah, New Mexico:

"We can leave Saturday to visit you. Do you want us? Answer quick. Father and mother leave Friday for Scotland. We'll have to go, if you don't want us.

"LARRY AND TOM ALDEN."

"You might make it shorter," chuckled the farmer.

"And muddle it all up so they wouldn't under-

stand it any better than you do your lawyer's letter," returned Larry.

"That's a bull's-eye," grinned Joe, whose mind was running to shooting terms.

And as neither their father nor mother interposed any objections, the boys telephoned the message to the operator at Bramley, who promised to send it at once.

CHAPTER III

WORD FROM THE WEST

ANXIOUSLY the two brothers waited for some news from the West and in the meantime got ready for the trip to Scotland.

"Oh, I don't want to go to Scotland!" sighed Tom. "I want to go to the ranch."

"Well, we've got to take what comes," answered his brother.

The boys went down to town and said good-by to their school chums. All were sorry they were going away and said they would be missed from the baseball team.

Returning to the farm, their mother met them with a peculiar smile on her face.

"Any news?" they asked eagerly.

"Yes, word came over the telephone a while ago."

"And what is it, ma?"

"The Wilders say to come and——"

"Hooray!"

"And not to bring a trunk," finished the mother. "The idea of two boys going away all summer without a trunk!"

"Of course we won't need a trunk!" declared Tom. "From the time we reach the ranch till we start for home I don't intend to wear a white shirt or collar."

"When we get out there we can buy some cowboy outfits," said Larry. "Hooray for Tolopah!"

The receipt of the message, which had been telephoned by the agent at Bramley while the boys were on their way back from the town, was more of a relief than either Larry or Tom was willing to acknowledge. And they ate their food with greater relish in the certainty that their dream of going to live on a ranch was to come true.

Each was absorbed in his own thoughts when the voice of their father roused them.

"Now that it's decided you are going West," he was saying, "I reckon I'll go over to Olmsted and make sure about our steamer tickets. We won't have any too much time in New York. You boys can go with me if you like."

Glad of the opportunity, the boys finished their dinner quickly and were soon whirling over the

hard clay road behind their father's span of spirited horses.

"I've decided to give each of you two hundred and fifty dollars," said Mr. Alden, as though expressing his thoughts out loud.

"Phew! Two hundred and fifty dollars! That's more money than I ever had all at once," exclaimed Tom in delight. "Think of having all that to spend, Larry."

"But you mustn't spend it all," warned their father. "I was going to say when you interrupted, Tom, that out of this money you must pay your railroad tickets, for your berths to sleep in, and for your meals. These things will amount to about seventy-five dollars, I should think."

"But that will still leave us one hundred and seventy-five dollars," declared Tom.

"True enough, but don't forget it will cost seventy-five dollars to get back. If I were you, when you get to the ranch, I would give the money for your return tickets to Mr. Wilder. He'll keep it for you, so you'll be sure not to spend it.

"It's a thing you ought always to remember when you take a trip of any distance—always save enough out of your money to carry you back home."

The boys promised to do as their father suggested, and the farmer continued:

"This will be your first experience with the world, and I don't want you to forget the things your mother and I have taught you.

"It takes bad men as well as good to make up life, and somehow it seems as though the bad men had the easiest time of it. You'll find gamblers and others who live by their wits in Tolopah. They'll try to be pleasant to you because you are young, and when they learn you are from the East they will try to get your money away from you.

"You must also be careful to whom you speak on the train. Under no conditions mention anything about the money you have with you. A lot of people, when they have any substantial sum, either like to show it in some way or to talk about it, and then, if they happen to be robbed of it, they wonder. Remember you can't recognize a thief by his clothes, and lots of the slickest of them travel about the country."

With this and other advice Mr. Alden counseled his sons, and so interested did they become in what he told them about the country of which they were soon to have their first glimpse that they were in Olmsted almost before they knew it.

Going first to the bank, Mr. Alden drew out the

money for his sons, obtained a letter of credit for himself and then arranged to purchase his steamship tickets in Pittsburg, whither all four travelers were going together.

When they reached home Mrs. Alden had finished her packing and all was practically ready for the start on the morrow.

After supper the farmer and his wife drove to Bramley to say good-by to their friends, but the two chums decided to stay at home.

Eager to be on their way, it seemed to Larry and Tom that the hours never passed so slowly. They tried to read, but in place of the print on the pages pictures of cowboys and bucking bronchos danced before their eyes, and they soon shut their books.

"Wish we'd gone with father and mother," exclaimed Tom. "It's more stupid here than saying good-by."

But scarcely were the words out of his mouth when the door opened and in came an old friend named Silas Haskins, a former gold miner.

"I got to go to Husted to-morrow, so I came over to-night to say 'so long,' " he said in explanation of his call.

Cordially the boys made him welcome, and the time passed quickly when they had led Silas round to talking about his adventures in the far West.

When at last the gold miner rose to go he said:

"I brung some presents for you. They'll be useful in the West."

And from his pockets Silas drew forth two fine big jackknives and two long pieces of thong.

"They're both the same, so you won't need to quarrel about 'em," he smiled as he handed their presents to each.

The boys were deeply touched by such evidence of friendship from their aged friend and were profuse in their thanks when he again put his hands in his pockets and produced two little bags made of buckskin and attached to a stout strip of the same strong material.

"I don't know how you're intending to carry your money," he began, "but——

"Why in our pockets," interrupted Larry.

"That's just what I supposed," grunted the old gold miner. "Now I want you to put it in these two bags and hang 'em round your necks. There can't no one get to 'em without waking you up nor take 'em without giving you a chance to fight."

Readily the boys promised to wear the money bags, and with a hearty handshake with each their aged friend went home.

The night passed quickly and the morning was busily spent in getting the luggage to the station.

As the family waited for the train the dingy little station was alive with people who had come to wish the Aldens pleasant journeys. And as the train left the Bramley depot the members of the ball team gave three rousing cheers for Larry and Tom.

The parting with their parents at Pittsburg was hard for the boys, but fortunately for them their train left first, and soon they were engrossed in watching their fellow passengers.

These consisted of a German boy, who seemed about their own age; two elderly gentlewomen, and two big men, who would have seemed well dressed had they not worn so much jewelry.

With interest the two chums watched the German youth and several times when they had turned to look at him they had found him gazing at them.

It was only the memory of their father's advice to be careful as to whom they spoke to on the train that prevented them from striking up an acquaintance. But when they found themselves at dinner seated at the same table with the foreigner they broke their reserve and told him their names.

In return the German said he was Hans Ober.

A speaking acquaintance thus established, Hans lost no time in asking questions about the United

States and particularly the West, to which Larry and Tom replied as well as they were able.

Evidently glad of their company, the German sat with them after the boys returned to their car from dinner.

Once or twice Hans had tried to learn where the chums were going without asking directly, but they had given evasive answers, and at last, as though believing confidence would beget confidence, he announced that he was going to join his brother Chris, who had a store in Tolopah.

As they heard their destination mentioned, Larry and Tom exchanged surprised glances, which did not need their words to let Hans know they were all three bound for the same place.

This coincidence removed whatever of reserve was left and the three boys talked freely.

Hans said he had come from Berlin and that his father had given him money to buy a share in his brother's business and told them of how his fears that he might lose the money had made him sit up the first two nights he was on the steamer.

CHAPTER IV

GUS MEGGET

THE boys were at breakfast the next morning when Hans, happening to look out the window, caught sight of the mighty river that almost divides the United States in half.

"My eye! but that's a big river," he exclaimed. "What do you call it?"

"The Mississippi," returned the brothers. They were too engrossed by their first glimpse of the "Father of Waters" to correct the German as he struggled to pronounce the name.

"Oh, look at the funny boats!" exclaimed Tom, pointing to the long line of river steamers that were tied up at the levee. "What are those things on the back end?"

"They are the paddle wheels. I know, because I've looked at pictures like them in my geography," replied Larry. "They have the paddle wheels on the end because the water is so shallow in places."

It was just after noon that the two chums and Hans were vouchsafed a glimpse of real "dyed-in-the-wool" cowboys.

The train had stopped at a crossing, as stations are known in Oklahoma, because of a hot-box on one of the wheels.

Learning that it would be all of a quarter of an hour before the trouble could be repaired, the boys had left their car and were filling their lungs with the bracing air.

It chanced that a gang of cowboys had ridden into the town for a celebration and, as it was unusual for a train to stop for any length of time at the crossing, they rode up to find out the reason.

For a few minutes they contented themselves with putting their ponies through all sorts of "stunts" to the great delight of the people on the train.

At the sight of them, Larry, Tom and Hans walked toward the cowboys and stared at them in wonder and admiration.

The cowboys had noticed the three lads, and, because they had been drinking bad "fire-water," suddenly decided to amuse themselves with them.

"Whatcher lookin' at?" roared one of the cow-punchers, a big fellow with close-set eyes and a heavy jaw.

The boys made no response.

"Can't cher speak? I'll teach you some manners then!" he bellowed.

In a thrice he whirled his pony and rode for the boys at full speed.

Ignorant of the roughness of cowboy fun, the three lads stood their ground, never thinking the fellow would hurt them.

The cowboy was riding straight at Hans. When the pony was within two leaps of the German boy Larry cried to him to jump to one side.

But Hans was too terrified to move, and the pony was almost upon him. In another moment he would be run down.

From the train rose shouts of warning and anger, changing in the next moment to cheers.

Realizing that the German boy could not save himself, Larry threw up his hands right in the face of the pony, causing the animal to rear so suddenly that only its rider's expert horsemanship saved him from being unseated.

At the same time Tom seized Hans and jerked him to one side just before the broncho's forelegs struck the ground again, almost on the very spot where the German boy had been standing.

Furious at the interference with his so-called fun, the cowboy roared at Larry:

"I'll teach you to scare Gus Megget's pony, you calf tenderfoot!"

Black, indeed, did it look for the three lads. The companions of the bullying cowboy who had announced himself as Gus Megget were riding up, yelling to him to make the "tenderfoot dance."

His face very white, but every line of his body breathing defiance, Larry faced his tormentor.

With a calmness that fairly took the breath away from the bully the elder of the brothers exclaimed in a voice loud enough to be heard by the other cowboys and the men about the train:

"I didn't pick this quarrel with you, but if you will get off your horse so that you have no advantage over me, I'll give you all the fight you want!"

An instant Megget glowered with rage at the mere stripling of a boy who had announced his willingness to fight him, then with a savage growl started to swing from his saddle.

"I'll fix you, you whelp!" he roared.

He aimed a savage blow at Larry, who ducked.

"Hi! leave my brother alone!" cried Tom, coming to the spot.

As Tom spoke Larry stooped and picked up a handful of dust. This he hurled straight into the cowboy's face.

"Good!" shouted Tom and did likewise.

The dust caused the cowboy to sneeze, and some bystanders commenced to laugh.

"He's got the best of you, Megget," observed another cowboy.

"I'll eat him!" yelled Megget and rushed at Larry with blood in his eyes.

But before he reached the boy a voice rang out:

"Keep on your horse, Gus Megget!"

Though Larry did not dare take his eyes from the bully, Tom and the cowboys looked to see who was taking a hand in the affair. They beheld a quiet-looking little man pointing a finger at the leader of the ruffians.

"I can't arrest you for driving off Jim Larson's cattle because we're in Oklahoma," continued the determined stranger. "But if I ever get my hand on you in Texas it'll go hard with you! Now vamoose before you try my patience too far! Come on back, boys. Gus Megget won't bother you any more."

"Prickly cactus! but it's 'Shorty,' the sheriff from Pawnee County!" gasped one of the band of cow-punchers. "Come on, Gus; we must dig out of here! Shorty may pass the word he's seen us."

Fear of the law caused the bully and his companions to wheel their ponies.

At this move the three boys turned and ran back

toward the train, while the excited passengers hooted and yelled at the discomfited cowboys.

The shouts of derision were more than Megget could stand. He shook his fist at the crowd in general and then at Tom and Larry in particular. Then he whirled around and disappeared from view in a cloud of dust.

Quickly the passengers all trooped to the cars and five minutes later the train was again in motion.

All the passengers wanted to shake hands with Tom and Larry, and for several minutes the boys were at the mercy of their well-meaning admirers. Again the sheriff came to their rescue.

"Go back to your own cars," he commanded. "The boys want to be left alone."

But the people gave no sign of heeding his words.

"Well, if you won't go at the asking, I'll make you go," he continued, and seizing the person nearest him, the sheriff turned him round and gave him a shove along the aisle of the car.

After three or four of the passengers had been pushed none too gently away, the others began to leave of their own accord, and the two brothers were able to make their escape.

"If it keeps on the way it has started, we're

likely to have a lively summer," remarked Larry when he was again back in his seat.

"I hope they don't come so quick for me," exclaimed Hans. And his tone was so plaintive that the others could not help but laugh.

"You'll either have to get some nerve or else stick mighty close to your friends here," declared the sheriff, who had remained to talk with the boys who had shown such pluck.

"Maybe I'll go back to Germany," sighed Hans.

"Oh, you'll get used to this part of the world after a while. Where are you going?"

"Tolopah."

"Well, that ain't the most refined place in the world," chuckled the man of the law, "but I don't believe you'll get as bad as what you got."

Pondering over this none too reassuring remark, Hans lapsed into silence, while Tom and Larry plied the sheriff with questions about life on the ranches and the antics of the cowboys.

As evening came on the boys grew restive. Their train was due at Tolopah at nine the next morning, and despite the fact that it was rushing along at the rate of forty miles an hour, it seemed to them to be scarcely moving. They had already passed two nights and two days on the train and the thought of putting another night in the berth,

especially as it was very hot, seemed impossible, making them fretful and cross.

"Who is he?" asked Larry of the conductor, after the sheriff had left the train.

"What, you never heard of Sam Jenks, sheriff of Pawnee County?'

"We come from Ohio," said Tom, as though apologizing for their ignorance.

"That accounts for it. If you lived between the Mississippi and El Paso you wouldn't ask such a question.

"Sam Jenks, known to every cowboy as 'Shorty,' is the nerviest man I know. There isn't a cattle thief or a bad man in this part of the country that won't run when he sees him—if he has the chance.

"You saw how Gus Megget and his gang got scared. It was just the sight of Shorty that scared him. He's got a record of sending more cattle thieves and crooked gamblers to jail than any three other sheriffs in the country. There never was anything he's afraid of, and he's just as tender-hearted as a kitten. Why, I know one time, after he'd sent a train robber to prison, he took the money out of his own pocket to support the rascal's wife and baby till he could get her folks to take her home. You sure made a friend that's worth having."

On Hans' account, Larry and Tom kept up a lively chatter during the evening, and it was not until the brothers were in their berths that they broached the subject of what to do should the sheriff's suspicions prove true.

Hans' unfitness for holding his own among the rough men of the plains made them sorry for him, and they discussed various plans, without arriving at any conclusion, till well into the night.

"What's the use of worrying?" said Tom finally. "Chris will probably show up all right. Let's wait and see." And with this understanding the boys dropped the matter.

Despite the fact that the day was to see the end of their journey, the boys slept late.

"You ge'mmen better hurry if you all wants yo' breakfas' befoh yo' gits to Tolopah," interrupted the porter. "We'll be thar in half an hour."

It was not a hearty meal the brothers and Hans ate, and soon they were back in their seats, looking to see that they had forgotten nothing before they closed their suit-cases.

Bringing two big valises of the extending kind the German sat with Larry and Tom. But their high spirits found no response in him, and as they neared their destination he could with difficulty keep back the tears, so worried was he.

"Here we are!" exclaimed Larry as he caught sight of some houses and barns.

And his words were verified by the porter, who came through the car calling:

"All out for Tolopah!"

Picking up their luggage, the boys hastened to the car steps.

"Hello, Bill! Hello, Horace!" cried the brothers eagerly as they caught sight of their friends on the station platform.

At the greetings the Wilder boys hurried toward the car.

In the pleasure of the meeting Tom and Larry forgot Hans.

"Come on," commanded Horace, seizing Tom's suit-case. "We won't dally here in Tolopah. We must get to the ranch before it gets too hot." And he led the way to where four bronchos stood tied to a railing.

Quickly the Wilders made fast the suit-cases to their saddles and untied the ponies.

"This is Blackhawk, Tom, and this is Lightning, Larry," said Horace as he handed the reins to the two boys. "They're a couple of the best ponies in New Mexico, and while you're here they'll be yours. You can get acquainted with them on the ride to the ranch."

Both animals were splendid creatures, well built and powerful. Blackhawk, as the name suggests, was jet black, his coat glistening in the sun, and Lightning was a roan.

Already Bill and Horace were on their ponies, and the two brothers were just swinging into their saddles when a voice cried:

"Tom! Larry!"

Turning their heads, the boys beheld Hans, the tears streaming down his cheeks, rushing toward them as fast as his valises would let him.

No need was there to ask if he had found a trace of his brother. The tears told all too plainly that he had not.

"Who in the world is that?" asked Horace in astonishment.

"A German boy who traveled with us," explained Tom. "Do you know any one in Tolopah by the name of Chris Ober?"

"Struck out for old Mexico, prospecting for gold, three months ago," replied Bill. "Why?"

"That's his brother Hans, who has come from Berlin to visit him," returned Tom. And hurriedly he gave an outline of the German lad's story.

"Phew! Chicken-hearted, is he?" commented Horace. "It won't do to leave him in Tolopah.

Luckily one of our men is in town with our grub wagon. He can ride out to the ranch with him."

When Tom imparted this information to Hans, the poor fellow was delighted and asked where he could find the outfit.

"I'll show him. You all ride on," said Horace. But the others refused, declaring they would all go together.

As the cavalcade started with Hans and his valises trying to keep up with them, many were the jests and laughs cast after them.

But the boys paid them no heed, and in a few minutes the German youth was safe in the provision wagon.

Putting their horses into a brisk canter, the four lads set out for the ranch.

Many were the questions the Wilders asked about their friends back in Ohio, and so busy were Tom and Larry in answering, and in relating all the events of consequence that had transpired since the family had left Bramley two years before, that the twenty miles which lay between Tolopah and the ranch seemed scarcely one.

CHAPTER V

THE HALF-MOON RANCH

As the boys drew rein in front of the broad, vine-covered piazza of the ranch house they were greeted by Mr. and Mrs. Wilder.

"Well, it does seem good to see some one from home," exclaimed the latter as she shook the hands of Tom and Larry.

"It sure does," asserted her husband. "Wish you'd brought your father and mother with you. What in the world started them off to Scotland?"

Quickly the brothers explained.

"Well, well! So Uncle Darwent really had some money," commented Mrs. Wilder. "I'm real glad, though of course it isn't as though your father needed any more. I should have thought you boys would have wanted to go with them."

"Not when we could spend the summer on your ranch," returned Larry. "But we began to be afraid we would be obliged to go, and we should

have if the telegram had been any later. No time ever seemed so long as when we were waiting for your answer."

"It was just luck we got your message," declared Horace. "Sometimes we don't go to town for a week. But something seemed to urge me to ride in the other morning, and when I arrived Con Brown hollered to me he had a telegram. When I read it, I didn't lose any time answering, and I made Con promise to rush it."

"Con's our telegraph operator," explained Bill. "Come on in and change your duds and then we'll look the ranch over."

Nothing loath to remove their clothes, which still smelled of engine smoke, despite their ride over the plains, as the brothers seized their suitcases and followed their young hosts, Larry exclaimed laughingly:

"You see we took your advice not to bring a trunk."

"Glad of it," asserted Horace joyously. "There's no need to dress out here. It's just great! You don't have to put on a collar from one week's end to another. But if you had brought a lot of clothes, mother would have made us dress too. That's why I mentioned the matter in my telegram."

This explanation was given in a low tone that Mrs. Wilder might not know her son had taken such effective measures to prevent his being obliged to "dress up," and the boys laughed heartily at the harmless joke.

The home of the Wilders was only one story high, but the rooms were big and comfortable. Around three sides ran the piazza, from which French windows, extending from the floor to the ceiling, opened, admitting any breeze that might be stirring.

The room assigned to the boys was on the west side of the house, and through the vines they could look across the plains to some mountains that towered in the distance.

"Our room is the next one to yours," said Bill. "We'll wait there till you are dressed. If you want anything, sing out."

Hastily Tom and Larry took off the clothes in which they had traveled, and bathed, glad of the opportunity to remove the cinders which had caused them no little discomfort.

"Bill and Horace seem just the same as when they lived in Bramley," observed Tom when they were alone. "Horace hasn't grown a bit."

"They are tanned up till they look like Indians, that's the only change I can see," returned his

brother. "Horace always will be short, but Bill's tall enough for two."

"You can't wear those caps," declared Bill as Tom and Larry appeared with the light baseball caps they had brought with them.

"But that's all we have," protested Larry, "except, of course, our straw hats. You don't expect us to knock round in those, do you?"

"Sure not. But if you wore those caps you'd get sunstruck out on the plains. We've got some sombreros you can take."

As the boys trooped out onto the piazza Tom espied a five-bar fence about a hundred yards from the house.

"That's the horse corral," explained Horace, noting the direction of his friend's gaze. "We don't keep our ponies in barns out here. The horses are all out on the range now, except eight we keep at home for ourselves."

Passing from the cool veranda, the boys walked toward a long building some thirty yards away.

"This is the bunk-house, where the cowboys stay when they're home," announced Bill. "There are ten of them, the best boys in this part of the country, but they are a lively lot. It's a good thing they are with the cattle. You'll have a chance to get used to ranching before they come in or they

might amuse themselves at your expense. Politeness isn't a cowboy's long suit."

"So I gathered," said Larry as he thought of his experience at the crossing in Oklahoma. But his mind was quickly diverted by his brother.

"What's that half-moon over the door mean?" asked the younger of the Alden boys as he caught sight of a gilded crescent that sparkled in the sunlight.

"Oh, tenderfoot! oh, tenderfoot! It is indeed fortunate the boys are away," exclaimed Bill in mock solemnity.

"That is the brand of this ranch. Every horse, every steer, cow and calf we own bears a half-moon because this is the Half-Moon Ranch. When any of our ponies or cattle go astray or mix with others, the only way we can tell which belong to us is by the brand."

"How do you put it on?" asked Tom.

"Burn it into the flesh with hot irons. If you can stay till fall, when we have a round-up, you can see how it's done," said Horace.

Feeling that they were indeed ignorant of ranch life, the two brothers decided to use their eyes and ask no more questions than were necessary.

Entering the bunk-house, they saw a long table covered with white oilcloth and a line of bunks

built in two tiers against the wall opposite the door. A big stove stood at one end, and there were pegs for saddles, bridles and lassoes all about.

From the bunk-house the boys went to the wagon sheds, which contained three or four farm wagons and also a buckboard.

"That's for mother," explained Bill. "She doesn't like to ride, but she can though if it's necessary.

"Here's where your saddles are," he continued, pointing to a beam into which pegs had been driven. "You want to remember them, especially when the boys are home. They don't like to have any one else take their saddles."

"We'll remember," declared Tom and Larry meaningly.

"I suppose we'll find our ponies in the corral?" hazarded Tom.

"Sure thing. And here's something else to keep in mind. Father always insists that each man put his pony in the corral himself. Of course this morning he did it for us, but he won't again."

"How do you get the horses when you want them? Call 'em?" asked Tom.

"Sometimes that will work—after a pony has come to know its master—but the quickest way is to take some oats in a pan," declared Horace.

"We keep the oats here," and he opened a bin at one side of the wagon shed.

"You can use oats on Blackhawk and Lightning and our own ponies, but when we want a strange horse we rope him. That makes me think, I've saved a couple of dandy lariats for you. Cross-eyed Pete, one of our boys, made them for me out of rawhide. They are in my room. Come on, we'll get them and then show you how to use them."

"Is it hard to learn?" inquired Larry.

"Yes, to throw one every time," replied Bill. "Horace and I have been practicing ever since we came out. We can do pretty well. But you ought to see Cross-eyed Pete! He's the best of all the boys. He's so good, he can drop a noose over a rattlesnake, and that's going some."

Before the lads could get the lassoes, however, Mrs. Wilder called them to get ready for dinner.

As the two visitors took their seats at the table a Chinaman, clad in white, glided noiselessly into the room and took his place behind Mr. Wilder's chair, ready to serve.

"Hop Joy, this is Mr. Larry and this is Mr. Tom," said Mrs. Wilder. "Whatever they ask you to do, you must do it."

The celestial, who was cook, washman and gen-

eral factotum on the Half-Moon Ranch, bowed gravely to each of the boys.

"That sounds very fine," laughed Mr. Wilder, "but you must be careful what you ask Hop Joy to do. If you disturb him when he's cooking he's apt to throw a pail of water at you."

"Hop's all right, father," declared Horace loyally. "He only throws water when the boys try to steal his doughnuts. Um—m, but Hop can make doughnuts! You two just wait till you're riding all day and then see if they don't taste good."

"So that explains the reason you keep on the right side of Hop Joy, eh?" answered Mr. Wilder, smiling. "I've often wondered why you were so willing to help him when the boys are home."

After the laughter this sally evoked had subsided Mrs. Wilder asked the boys about their journey.

In amazement the Wilders listened as the experiences were related, and when Larry finished the account of his mix-up with the cow-punchers Bill exclaimed:

"And here Horace and I have been making fun of you for tenderfeet. The joke seems to be on us."

"That's what it is," asserted their father.

"There are not many men, let alone lads, who can say they have faced Gus Megget and got the best of him."

It was the chums' turn to be surprised as they heard this statement.

"Then you know him?" queried Tom.

"I know of him," corrected the ranchman, and the boys noted that the kindly expression of his face disappeared as he spoke. "Gus Megget is a very bad man. He hasn't done an honest day's work for five years. People say he is a train robber, and I've always believed he was a cattle thief, too. From what you tell me, that's Shorty Jenks' opinion. If the truth were known, I think Megget would prove to be the head of a gang of cattle thieves."

And how true were Mr. Wilder's suspicions, they were all destined to learn.

The recital of their adventuresome journey recalled to the boys that they had entirely forgotten to tell about Hans' coming.

Each of the four apparently thought of the timid German boy at the same time and looked at one another uneasily.

And their anxiety was not lessened when Mrs. Wilder asked:

"What became of Hans? Did you call him? Did his brother meet him?"

"No, he didn't," said Larry. Then, determined to get the matter settled at once, he continued: "Mr. Wilder, I'm afraid I have imposed on your kindness, but I asked Bill and Horace to let the German boy come to your ranch until we could decide what he should do. He's so—so scared, I did not like to leave him alone in Tolopah."

"I asked to have him come, too," declared Tom, as though unwilling his brother should bear all the blame, if blame there was to be.

"That was right, quite right," said Mr. Wilder, after a quick glance at his wife. "Tolopah wouldn't agree with him very well. We've plenty of room and perhaps he will get over his fear. I can use another hand very well, if he wants work."

It was a great relief to all the boys to have the matter settled so pleasantly, and they resumed their laughter and chatter.

When dinner was finished they all went out onto the piazza, where Tom and Larry were initiated into the mysteries of throwing a lasso. Then the visitors were taken around and shown many sights new to them.

CHAPTER VI

IN THE SADDLE

"How far away are those mountains?" asked Tom, gazing in their direction as they walked to the corral the next day.

"About forty miles," replied Bill. "They are called the 'Lost Lode' hills, because there is said to be a rich silver mine in them somewhere that the Spaniards worked hundreds of years ago. Just where it is, though, no one has ever been able to discover."

"Wouldn't it be great if we could find it?" exclaimed Larry eagerly. "Do you suppose your father would let us go and try? Have you ever been over to the hills?"

"Lots of times on hunting trips. But we never explored them very much. The trouble is no one knows whether the mine is on this side or the other."

"But haven't they searched for it?" queried

Tom, to whose mind a silver mine suggested unlimited wealth.

"Lots of men have tried, but no one who has gone to find it has ever been seen again," returned Bill. "They say the mine is haunted by the ghosts of the old Spaniards who discovered it and that they kill any one who goes near it."

At the suggestion of phantom Spaniards guarding the mine and despatching those who found it the brothers laughed.

"You surely don't believe in ghosts?" inquired Tom, a tone of scorn in his voice. "Who started the story about the ghosts, anyhow?"

"I don't know," responded the elder of the Wilder boys, rather disappointed that the legend did not make more of an impression on his friends. "We heard it when we came here. The cowboys all believe it, and nothing would make them pass a night in those hills if they could help it."

But ghosts were something in which the two brothers had been taught not to believe, and Tom exclaimed:

"Huh! I'll bet some one has found the mine and started these stories to keep other people from going there. Maybe there are three or four mines," he added as his lively imagination began to work.

"It's all right for you to laugh; you haven't been in the hills," snapped Horace. "If you'd heard Cross-eyed Pete tell about the night he was camping there and was scared away by hearing men shooting you might think differently."

"Just the same, I'd be willing to go and hunt for it," persisted Tom.

"And so would I," chimed in his brother. "I say," he continued, "why can't we go on a hunting trip? We needn't say anything about trying to find the mine. Then, if we didn't, no one could laugh at us and say we got scared."

The refusal of the boys from Ohio to believe in the haunted mine had at first nettled Bill and Horace, but they had always been keen to hear or see phantoms, and at Larry's proposal of the hunting trip they became enthusiastic.

"It will be great sport, if father will let us," assented Horace. "Come on, we'll ask him."

And abandoning their intention of roping ponies, they turned back to the house in search of Mr. Wilder.

Finding him on the piazza, they lost no time in laying their plan for a hunting trip before him.

As he beheld the eager faces and noted the lithe, supple bodies of the boys, in whose eyes shone the light of fearlessness, the ranchman replied:

"I have no objection, if you don't go beyond the foothills. Bill, you remember the trails I showed you last spring, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right, keep to them. You boys certainly ought to be able to take care of yourselves. Go and tell Hop Joy to put up some grub for you. You had better camp on the plains to-night, so you won't be able to shoot your food."

Delighted at the thought of going on a hunting trip, the boys hurried away to the Chinaman.

"Golly! You boyee go shootee?" exclaimed the celestial when he had received the orders to pack their food. "No flaid ghostee?"

"Of course not," replied Horace. "There's no such thing as ghosts, Hop Joy."

"Mebbe so, mebbe not; no be too sure," grunted the Chinaman. "Plete, him say they be."

But the boys did not linger to argue the matter, and only waiting to see that Hop Joy put in a quantity of doughnuts, went to get their rifles and shells ready.

To their surprise, when they returned to the piazza, they found the ranchman busily overhauling his guns.

"I reckon I'll go with you," he explained. "I haven't been hunting for some time, and as every-

thing is quiet I can get away for three or four days as well as not."

"Oh, good! Hooray!" exclaimed the boys.

And Horace added: "Now we won't have to worry about getting lost."

Not long did it take the lads to clean their rifles and fill their cartridge belt with shells.

"Have you two got any knives?" inquired Mr. Wilder, looking at Tom and Larry.

"Sure," replied Larry, and he told of the old gold miner's presents and his advice about always carrying the pieces of thong with them.

"Silas is no fool," smiled the ranchman. "If you remember all he told you, you won't get into trouble. Still, I think it would be just as well for you to let me put your money in my safe. Then you surely can't lose it."

"That's what father told us to do," said Larry as he and Tom removed their buckskin money bags and gave them to the ranchman. "We forgot it, though."

"Speaking about forgetting, what about the German boy?" asked Mrs. Wilder, who had come to learn the cause of the preparations.

At the mention of Hans the four lads looked at one another in dismay. But the ranchman came to the rescue, saying:

"From all Larry and Tom say, I don't reckon he'll be keen on hunting. You can let him help Ned."

"Ned's our handy man," explained Horace in a whisper. "He drives the grub wagon to Tolopah and to the boys in their camps."

"Well, here comes the wagon now," observed Mrs. Wilder as she caught sight of the big white-covered wagon, called a prairie schooner in the old days, bobbing over the plains about a mile away.

"Oh, don't let's wait," protested Horace. "We can saddle up and go and meet them. I'll make my pony dance and perhaps that will scare Hans so he won't care to go."

"All right," laughed Mr. Wilder. "Bring up the ponies. Get Buster for me."

Running to the wagon shed, the boys gathered the saddles, bridles, some oats and pans and started for the corral.

Opening the big gate, they entered, closed it and then threw their saddles on the ground.

"Always close the gate before you start to get your ponies," instructed Bill. "Sometimes they cut up, and if they get out onto the prairie it's the old Harry of a job to catch them again.

"Now put your oats in your pans. Watch Horace and me and you'll see what to do."

When they had prepared the oat bait, the two Wilder boys began to beat on the pans, calling Buster and the other ponies by name.

The animals, which were at the farther end of the corral browsing, lifted their heads and then came trotting toward them, halting about ten feet away.

"Swish your pans so they can hear the oats," whispered Bill.

Slowly the ponies approached, as though deciding whether they preferred their oats or their liberty.

"Come, Blackhawk! Come, Buster!" called Horace.

The boys set the pans on the ground. For a moment the ponies eyed them and then trotted up, the eight crowding one another to get at the four measures.

"Now's the time," breathed Bill.

In a trice the bits were thrust into the ponies' mouths and the leather over their ears.

Lightning plunged back, but Larry grabbed the reins just in time and held him.

"Push the pan to him," directed Horace, and, as he smelled the oats, the pony grew still and was soon munching contentedly.

After catching his own mount, Bill had bridled

Buster, and as soon as the oats were devoured, all five were saddled with little trouble and the boys were quickly on the backs of four of them, Bill leading the poy for his father.

It required but a few minutes to make fast the saddle bags Hop Joy had filled with food, tin plates, cups, knives and forks, coffee pot, sugar and coffee and to tie on their sleeping blankets.

Then they buckled on their cartridge belts, slung their rifles across their shoulders and again mounted.

By the time they were ready, however, the grub wagon was coming into the yard.

"Where's Hans?" gasped Larry, the first one to discover that there was only one occupant.

With a broad grin suffusing his face, the driver cried:

"Whoa!"

As the horses stopped Mr. Wilder, fearing that the boy had been made the butt of some mad prank, said severely:

"If anything happened to that lad, I shall hold you responsible, Ned. Where is he?"

"Gone with his brother Chris."

"His brother!" cried Tom. "Did his brother come back?"

"He did—yesterday. Hans found him, and

such a meeting nobody ever see before. The brother is going to another town and Hans with him. They started to-day."

The knowledge that Hans had found his brother was a great relief to Tom and Larry, and they lost no time in saying so.

"If you feel that way, then it surely is all right," declared the ranchman. "We're going into the hills for a few days hunting, Ned. If you need me, you'll find me somewhere on the 'Lost Lode' trail."

"With them tenderfeet?" inquired the handy man, eyeing Tom and Larry doubtfully.

"Don't take them for easy, Ned. They put the laugh on Gus Megget, so I reckon they can take care of themselves in the hills and on the Half-Moon, too," he added with an emphasis which was to act as a warning to be passed along to the cowboys.

"So it's them two I heard 'em talkin' about in Tolopah? Howdy, gents! I sure takes off my bonnet to you," and Ned swept his sombrero good naturedly from his head. "Say, you two are the only topic of conversation in Tolopah about now. Couple of passengers told what you all done, and now everybody's telling everybody else. So it was

you kids put the kibosh on Gus Megget. Phew! I hope I don't get you riled up." And clucking to his horses, Ned drove on to the wagon shed.

"When you go into Tolopah, you'll own the town," smiled Mr. Wilder, looking at the brothers. "You see, you are famous already."

But Larry and Tom only laughed, while the latter exclaimed:

"I'd rather find the Lost Lode than fight Megget."

"So my boys have told you about the mine and the ghosts, eh?" And shaking his bridle, the ranchman waved good-by to his wife and cantered away, followed by the others.

For a few minutes they rode without talking, the Wilder boys a trifle envious of the reputation their friends had achieved and the chums trying to get accustomed to riding with a rifle bumping their backs.

They soon got the swing of it, however, and, as the ponies settled into an easy, steady lope, Tom exclaimed:

"Larry, we're in the saddle and on the plains at last."

"Like it, what?" queried Horace.

"It's what we've been dreaming of for months," declared Larry. "Only, I say, Mr. Wilder, let's

drop Megget. All we did was to get away from him."

"As you like," smiled the ranchman, "but that's something."

CHAPTER VII

A RACE IN THE MOONLIGHT

Now through waving grass up to their knees, now through stretches of sage brush the hunters rode. Three or four times they caught sight of cattle in the distance, which Horace eagerly declared belonged to the Half-Moon, explaining that the biggest herds were in Long Creek bottoms, about fifty miles southwest, where the cattle could find water as well as good grazing ground.

"Fifty miles, gracious! Do you own so much land?" asked Larry of Mr. Wilder.

"No. We have a thousand acres, more or less. But my neighbors and I have leased the rights to graze in Lone Creek."

"Neighbors?" repeated the elder of the brothers in surprise. "Why I can't see any house but yours. In fact, I haven't seen any since we left Tolopah."

"And there isn't any within thirty miles. There are two on the south and more north, even farther

away. But we call them neighbors just the same. Anybody within a day's ride is a neighbor," explained the ranchman. And as he noted the look of amusement that appeared on the faces of the brothers, he added: "You won't think so much of distances after you've been out here a while."

At the end of two hours, as they mounted the crest of a great roll in the prairies, the dried-up course of a stream was disclosed.

"If you follow that, it will lead you to Lone Creek," explained Horace. "Down about ten miles there's a place called the Witches' Pool, where we go fishing. It's so deep it never dries. We'll go there some day."

"More ghosts?" inquired Larry as he repeated the name of the pool.

"No, no ghosts," laughed Mr. Wilder, "just the *ignis fatuus,* or will-o'-the-wisps. All cowboys are very superstitious, you must remember. The land round the pool is swampy and at night you can sometimes see the lights dancing about. I suppose some one saw them, and, finding no person there, immediately decided the pool was a gathering place for witches."

"Pete says it's the bodies of the men who have died of thirst on the plains searching for water," declared Horace in an awed tone.

"That's an ingenious explanation, but it is not the truth, my boy. The lights are caused by certain gases that come from the marshy ground and glow when the atmosphere is in a certain condition. Over in Scotland, on the peat bogs, they call them 'friars' lanterns.' "

"My, but I'd like to see one," sighed Tom.

"Then I'm afraid you'll be obliged to camp by the pool. You might go there a hundred nights and never see a sign of one," returned the ranchman. And then, as the shadows cast by the mountains were reaching farther and farther out onto the prairie, he thought it best to turn the minds of the boys into other channels.

"Shall we camp in the open or would you rather push on to the foothills?" he asked. "It'll be dark by the time we get there."

"I vote to keep going," answered Larry.

"How far is it?" inquired Tom, who was beginning to feel the effects of the many miles in the saddle.

"About fifteen, which means two hours at least, because the darker it gets the slower we'll be obliged to go till you two get more used to riding the plains," responded Bill.

"If we keep on, and I feel stiff in the morning, we'll be there and I shall not be compelled to cover

the fifteen miles," mused the younger of the brothers as much to himself as to the others. "I'm for pushing on, too."

Laughing at their guest's discomfort, the others readily acquiesced, and they crossed the stream bottom.

Save the noise made by themselves, the twitter of birds, and the occasional cry of some prairie dog routed out by their approach, the silence of the plains was intense. At first Tom and Larry did not notice it, but as they rode mile after mile they began to feel its depression.

"It often drives men crazy," asserted the ranchman when Larry mentioned his feeling. "That's why we never send a man out alone to herd. Having some one to talk to it a big relief, I can tell you, after you've been a week or so on the prairies with nothing but a bunch of stolid cattle. The very monotony of their grazing and chewing their cuds gets on your nerves."

As darkness came on, however, the awful silence was broken. From all sides came the barking of coyotes, as though they were signaling one another their whereabouts.

"That howling would scare me a great deal quicker than any ghosts or witches," observed

Tom. "My, but it's mournful! Do they keep that up all night?"

"Indeed they do," replied Horace, delighted to think one thing had been discovered which the two visitors feared, "only it gets worse the darker it grows. Besides, when they are hungry, they'll follow you and attack you."

"That wouldn't be so bad so long as you had a gun with you," interposed Larry. "I'd like to get a shot at one."

"Then there's your chance, over on the left," exclaimed Mr. Wilder.

Unslinging his rifle, the elder of the Alden boys looked eagerly in the direction indicated. But it was so dark he could see nothing and he said so.

"Can't you see those two little balls of fire right opposite you? If you can't, say so. I'll stop him myself," returned the ranchman.

Yet even as he spoke the coyote turned and fled.

"It's just as well," added Mr. Wilder after he had announced the fact. "You'll have a chance to shoot at something better than a measely prairie wolf to-morrow, I hope."

"Or perhaps to-night," chimed in Horace. "Maybe a ghost'll attack our camp."

"That will do, youngster. If you talk any more about ghosts, I'll make you ride back to the ranch

in the dark. If you keep on, you'll work yourself up so you'll think every sound you hear is a Spaniard from the mine, and there will be no sleep for any of us."

This command had the desired effect, and Horace gave up the attempt of trying to frighten his friends.

For a time the darkness grew more and more intense till it was all the riders could do to make out the forms of one another. But at last the clouds passed over, revealing the stars, and soon the moon rose, full and brilliant, changing the swaying grass into a seeming sea of silver with its light.

In wonder the brothers gazed at the transformatoin and Larry said:

"I wish the plains could be like this always. They don't seem half so terrible."

But the boys soon had other things to think about. They were so close to the mountains that they could see the great cliffs glistening in the moonlight above the trees from which they rose, sheer.

"I don't wonder they say these mountains are haunted," exclaimed Tom. "I can almost believe I see men moving along the top of that middle cliff."

"Better curb your imagination then," chided Mr. Wilder. "It's a good thing we've got to pitch camp pretty soon or you'd all get the nerves."

At Tom's words the other boys had sought the middle cliff with their eyes and suddenly Bill exclaimed:

"Tom's right, father! There are men moving along the top of the precipice!"

Mr. Wilder had been intent on searching the base of the mountains for a place to camp for the night. But at his elder son's statement he looked up quickly, drawing rein that he might be sure the motion of his horse played no trick on his eyes.

Breathlessly the others waited his decision.

The cliff at which they all were staring so intently was about half way up the mountain and above it rose another wall of rock. And it was against the base of this latter that the objects which attracted Tom's attention were silhouetted.

"By jove! They are men," exclaimed Mr. Wilder excitedly. "I never knew there was a trail along the base of that cliff before."

The boys were tremendously stirred up as they heard this confirmation.

"Perhaps they are the men going to guard the Lost Lode for the night," Horace whispered. "They wouldn't need a trail to walk on, father."

"Steady, boy, steady," returned the ranchman. "Those men are flesh and blood, don't worry about that. Who they are I don't know. Probably some hunters like ourselves."

"That couldn't be the way to the mine, could it?" hazarded Larry, whose eagerness to discover a silver mine had received new impetus. "Can't we go there to-morrow and find out?"

"We'll see when to-morrow comes," declared Mr. Wilder. "But there's no occasion to get excited. The mountains are full of men hunting and prospecting all the time. Come on, we'll camp under that big tree up there to the right. Whoever gets there first will be boss of the camp."

The challenge for a race, with the honor of being in command of the hunt as the prize, served to take the boys' thoughts from the mysterious men on the trail as nothing else could, and quickly they leaped their ponies forward.

The spot selected by the ranchman for their night's bivouac was about a quarter of a mile away and in the opposite direction from the cliffs.

Yelling like young Indians, the boys urged their jaded ponies to greater efforts.

Tom and Horace, being lighter than the others, had not tried their mounts so much, and rapidly they drew ahead.

"We simply must beat them," called Bill to Larry. "If they get in first, they'll make us haul all the water and wash dishes—at least Horace will, if he wins."

Leaning over their ponies' necks and rising in the saddles to lighten their weight as much as possible, the two elder boys set out to overtake their brothers.

With spur and lariat end they belabored their mounts and gamely the horses responded.

Leap by leap they cut down the lead, were soon abreast of the others and then forged ahead, shouting in triumph as they opened clear ground between them.

Only about a hundred yards were the leaders from the tree.

Feeling his pony tiring under him, despite his urging, Horace gasped at Tom:

"Hit Blackhawk with the end of your lasso and then hang on for dear life!"

Instantly Tom obeyed.

As the big black felt the blow he uttered a snort of rage, jerked forward his head and seemed to fly over the ground.

Like a flash he caught Bill and Larry. Frantically they strove to keep up with him, but in a few bounds he had passed them.

"Tom wins!" yelled Horace with glee.

But his delight at the success of his ruse was shortlived.

Blackhawk was not accustomed to being beaten and, though ordinarily he had a good temper, when he was angry he could be very mean. Accordingly, as though reasoning to himself that he had done his share in carrying his rider so many miles, when he felt the sharp cut of the lariat he resented it. And his resentment took the form of a vicious lunge forward of his head, which enabled him to get the bits in his teeth, with which advantage no one could control him.

Despite his greater weight, the ranchman had been close up with the boys and had noted Blackhawk's action.

Realizing that it would be hopeless to try to overtake the runaway, and fearing that some injury might befall Tom, Mr. Wilder shouted:

"Rope the black, Bill! He's got the bit!"

Loosening his lariat as quickly as possible, the elder of the Wilder boys began to whirl it round his head.

"Throw it! throw it!" roared the ranchman. "Can't you see you're losing ground every second?"

Never before had Bill been called on for so im-

portant a cast of his lasso, and for a moment his hand trembled.

"Steady! Let her go now!" counseled his father.

At the word Bill put forth all his strength and the rope shot from his hand, the noose opening perfectly as it sped through the air.

Fascinated, the others watched as it hung a moment in the air and dropped directly over Blackhawk's head.

"Pretty cast!" praised the ranchman. "Now ride along. Don't pull up too soon."

But his words were too late.

The pony which his elder son rode was perfectly trained to rope steers. As it caught the sharp hiss of the lariat the animal had slackened its stride, and the instant it felt the rope tighten had stiffened its legs and braced, almost squatting back on its haunches.

And the next moment Blackhawk was jerked from his feet, measuring his length on the ground, while Tom went sailing through the air, alighting about twenty feet away.

"Hold as you are!" ordered Mr. Wilder of Bill and then dashed for the kicking black, with Larry and Horace at his heels.

"Tom! Tom! are you hurt?" called his brother.

For a second there was no reply, and then their anxiety was relieved by seeing Tom stand up.

"Any bones broken?" asked Mr. Wilder, who had reached the black and was dismounting.

"No. I'm all right, thanks to the prairie grass," replied the younger of the brothers. "Is Blackhawk hurt?"

"I don't think so. Ease up, Bill. I've got him by the bridle."

Quickly the elder of the Wilder boys rode forward, and as the prostrate pony felt the rope loosen he bounded to his feet.

With skilled eye the ranchman looked him over and there was a world of relief in his voice as he said:

"We got out of that scrape mighty luckily. There isn't a scratch on Blackhawk, and if Tom's——"

"There's no scratch on me either," returned the boy. "But what about the race, do I win or not?"

"Considering you flew from Blackhawk's back almost to the tree, I reckon you do," declared Mr. Wilder.

And looking up, Tom noticed that he was, indeed, standing under the branches of the tree that marked the goal.

CHAPTER VIII

HORACE IN DANGER

As the others reached the tree they dismounted, unbuckled the saddle bags and removed the saddles.

"Well, commander, do you wish me to select a place to hobble the ponies?" asked Mr. Wilder, addressing Tom.

"Yes, sir. I never was in charge of a camp before, so you must tell me what to do."

"Oh, make me your lieutenant and I'll tell you," pleaded Horace. "I know all about it."

"You can give orders all right," grunted Bill, "there's no doubt about that. I see myself lugging wood."

All laughed heartily at this reference to Horace's fondness for commanding, and the younger of the comrades replied:

"All right, Horace, you may be my lieutenant. Only you must tell me what there is to be done, and I will give the orders."

Although by this arrangement the youngest of the party would be deprived of most of his powers, he readily agreed, saying:

"Wood must be collected for the fire, the food and dishes must be unpacked, supper cooked and water located."

"Better put me on the job of getting water, because I shall picket the horses where they can get a drink," declared the ranchman.

"Then, Larry, you and Bill build the fire and get supper ready. Horace, I'll put you in charge and you must arrange the place for us to sleep. I can see some pine trees yonder. Break off some limbs and spread them on the ground. Then put the blankets over them. I'm going with Mr. Wilder to bring the water and to learn how to hobble the horses."

"You're a fine commander to be lieutenant for—not," declared Horace. "Gave me the meanest job of all." Yet he lost no time in obeying.

Quickly each one set about the work assigned to him, for the sight of the doughnuts and other good things to eat, after their long ride, made them hungry.

"Get the coffee pot and then sling the reins of Lightning and Buster on your arm and come with

me, Tom," said Mr. Wilder. "I'll take Blackhawk, because he's still cranky, and the other two."

The ranchman, however, let the ponies lead him more than he led them, for he knew their instinct would take them to the nearest water.

Yet there was no need of their guidance, for in a few minutes the ears of the hunters caught the sound of running water.

"That's a brook," declared Mr. Wilder, and quickly he led the way to a spot where they found a fair-sized pool formed by a stream coming from the hills.

The coffee pot was a monster, holding all of two gallons, and this the ranchman directed Tom to fill before allowing the ponies to satisfy their thirst.

As the animals were drinking Mr. Wilder took the lariats he had brought and tied an end around the left ankle of each pony, making another noose round the hind ankle on the same side at such a distance that there was about three feet of the rope between the hoofs.

"Such a short line makes it impossible for them to run or even walk very well," he explained, "so they will just stay here and browse.

"Now we'll remove the bridles. Always remember to hobble your pony before unbridling."

"But the rope ends?" asked Tom.

"In a place like this, where there are no rocks between which they can get bound, you can let them drag. When it is rocky, you can wind the rope loosely round their necks."

Before the task was finished they heard Horace calling.

"Hey, you! Hurry with that coffee pot!" he shouted. "We want to start it boiling."

"Then come and get it," replied his father.

But Tom had already picked it up and was carrying it toward the camp fire, which was blazing cheerily beneath the big tree. Taking the bridles, Mr. Wilder soon followed.

Larry had spread a blanket on the ground for a tablecloth and arranged the plates, knives and forks. In the middle he had made a pile of doughnuts and around them set three pies.

To Bill had fallen the task of cooking, and he was busy frying eggs and bacon in a long-handled pan, which he rested on a bed of coals.

At the sight of Tom and the coffee pot, he called:

"Tell Horace to pour some water into the drinking cups, put the coffee in the pot and set it in the fire. Supper'll be ready before the coffee unless you hurry."

But Tom was not a boy to shirk work, and di-

recting his brother to bring the cups, he sent his aide for the coffee while he prepared a good hot bed of coals.

The odor from the sputtering bacon whetted their appetites, and all but Bill devoted their energies to hurrying the coffee and to such good purpose that they disproved the old saying, "A watched pot never boils."

At last all was ready, and the hunters squatted tailor fashion on the ground, each before his plate of eggs and bacon and a steaming cup of coffee.

"My, but this tastes better than anything I ever ate before," declared Larry.

"Because the ride has given you a keen appetite," said the ranchman with a smile.

The others were too busy eating to offer any comment, and the meal progressed in silence till almost the last bit of food had disappeared.

"Hop Joy certainly can cook," complimented Tom as he reached for another doughnut from the fast vanishing pile.

"That's what I told you," returned Horace. "From the way they are going, it's a good thing I went back and put in an extra supply when Hop wasn't looking."

"He'll fix you when we get back!" cried Bill. "Tom, who does the dishes? For your benefit and

before my young brother gets a chance to speak, I'll tell you that the cook never washes the dishes."

"Oh, what a whopper!" cried Horace. "Tom, the cook always washes them. That's all he does, wash dishes and cook."

"Well, we'll all help," declared the youthful commander of the camp.

This arrangement met with laughing approval, and because of the many hands, the task was soon finished.

"And now, as we must be up with the dawn if we are going to get a shot at any deer, I suggest that we turn in," remarked Mr. Wilder.

"Where did you put the pine boughs, Horace? I don't see them."

"I left them over by the tree," replied the lieutenant, grinning. "I didn't know how many each of you would want, so I thought the best way was to let you pick out all you pleased."

"Lazy bones! Lazy bones!" shouted the other boys, and Tom cried:

"That trick won't work this time. Now, hurry and tote the boughs over."

Making a face at his superior, Horace jumped up and soon came back, dragging a monster pile of fragrant pine branches, which he quickly separated into five heaps.

"Does the honored general wish me to wrap and tuck each one in his bed or will they do that themselves?" he asked, bowing in mock deference.

"The honored general sentences you to do the dishes in the morning for that," returned Tom with assumed dignity, and in rare good humor they quickly placed their saddles as pillows and unrolled their blankets.

Fixing the fire so that it could not spread and cause any harm, Mr. Wilder bade the boys turn in, and soon they were sound asleep.

Exhausted from the excitement of their arrival and the long ride, Tom and Larry were so deep in slumber that though Mr. Wilder called them when he himself got up, they did not wake.

His own sons, however, heard his call and quickly crawled from their blankets.

"Come on, we'll get breakfast. Let Tom and Larry sleep," exclaimed their father. "Remember, they are not so accustomed to riding as you two are."

This caution was uttered just in time, for Horace was in the very act of yanking the youthful commander by the foot when his father spoke.

Not long did it take to prepare the food, and Bill was just pouring the coffee when Mr. Wilder aroused his guests.

"Wh—what is it?" gasped Larry, sitting up and staring about him dazedly.

"It's breakfast, that's all," said Horace. "Hey, Mr. Commander, you'll be court-martialed if you miss grub." And he proceeded to drag Tom from his bed of boughs by the heels.

Chagrined to think they had not helped with the meal, Tom and Larry quickly arose and ran to the brook to wash.

As they stood at the pool they forgot their ablutions in the beauty of the scene before them.

The grass of the prairie was heavy with dew and in the rose glow of the sky the particles of moisture sparkled and glistened like countless crystals.

"Seems like fairyland," whispered Tom, as though afraid if he spoke out loud the scene would vanish.

A call from Horace, however, roused them to action, and in a few minutes they were eating heartily.

"What sort of a brook is that?" asked Larry. "I didn't see any outlet, yet water keeps running into the pool all the time."

"There must be some underground stream into which it empties," replied the ranchman. "There

are two such subterranean rivers in these hills, and I suppose this pool connects with one of them."

Discussion of such phenomena was prevented by his continuing:

"Hurry now and pack up. I'll bring up the ponies while you are getting ready."

Eager to begin the ascent of the hills, the boys worked rapidly, and by the time Mr. Wilder appeared with the horses everything was in the saddle bags, though Horace had dispensed with the formality of wiping the dishes.

It was the task of but a few minutes to make fast the saddle bags and blankets, and just as the sun flooded the plains with its golden light the hunters swung into their saddles.

Riding southward, Mr. Wilder followed the base of the hills for a good mile till he came to a well-worn trail.

"We'll follow this run for a while," said he. "Bill, you and Larry can ride at the rear. I'll keep Horace and Tom with me, so they won't be tempted to spoil our sport by shooting at the first deer they see, no matter how far out of range it is. For the benefit of you two," he added, addressing the brothers, "I will say that when you are riding a trail, and especially a mountain trail, always let your pony have plenty of rein. It's easier for him.

He won't be so likely to stumble and fall, and a pony can generally keep a trail better than a man."

These instructions delivered, Mr. Wilder turned his pony into the run and the others followed in Indian file, the two elder boys bringing up the procession.

For an hour they rode, now with their ponies scrambling over rocks, now up such steep ascents that the comrades feared the animals would fall over onto them.

But by leaning far forward at such times, they had no mishaps and at last rode out onto a plateau from which they looked down into a vale some two hundred yards below.

A mist hovered over the basin, rendering it impossible for them to see the bottom.

The boys were disappointed and said so.

"On the contrary, it is lucky," declared Mr. Wilder. "There is a brook down there and it is a favorite drinking ground for deer. Under the cover of the mist we shall be able to go down, and it will act as a blanket to keep our scent from the sensitive-nosed beauties."

"Going to ride down?" queried Tom, looking about for some trail.

"No, we'll leave the ponies here. Lively now and hobble them and don't talk."

The plateau was some hundred yards long by half as many wide, and quickly the hunters rode their horses to where the mountain again rose, turning the horses loose in some delicious grass.

"Be very careful, very careful in descending," cautioned the ranchman. "The ground is wet and the rocks are slippery, and if you once start to fall, there's no knowing where you will land."

All the boys had hunted enough to know that the safest way to carry a loaded gun is with the muzzle pointed to the ground, the butt resting against the back of the right shoulder, with the arm akimbo, thus forming a rest for the barrel. And in this fashion they set out.

After a few minutes' search Mr. Wilder exclaimed:

"Here's the run the deer use. Steady now. Mind your feet. Don't make a sound."

With almost no noise, the party descended. Now and then one of the lads slipped, but there was always a rock or a sapling at hand which they could grasp to steady themselves and no one fell.

As he reached the edge of the mist, Mr. Wilder held up his hand as a signal to halt.

Turning his head, he listened intently for some sound that might give him an inkling as to the whereabouts of the deer.

In his eagerness to locate them, Horace moved away from the trail to the left and then stopped.

Barely had he halted when a loud sneeze rang out from directly in front of him.

So sudden and so near was it that Horace cried out in fright.

At the same moment the antlers of a big buck appeared from the mist and then vanished as quickly, only to reappear a moment later, followed by its head and shoulders.

Whether the buck or the hunters were more surprised it would be hard to say. For several seconds they stared at one another.

Larry, Tom and Horace were trembling like leaves, victims of "buck fever," a species of stage fright which makes it impossible for any one to hold a gun steady, and Bill was in such a position behind the others that he could not aim his rifle unless he put it between the heads of the others.

The ranchman alone was where he could bring down the buck, and he hesitated, unwilling to risk a chance to get several other deer by dropping the one in front of him.

It was the buck himself that put an end to the remarkable situation. Of a sudden, with a snort of rage, he lowered his sharp pronged antlers and charged at Horace.

With a yell of terror the boy turned to flee and stumbled.

In an instant the scene had changed from one of comedy to one of possible tragedy should the infuriated beast reach his victim.

But Mr. Wilder was equal to the occasion. Throwing his rifle to his shoulder, he fired.

True was his aim and the buck threw up his head, staggered and then toppled over.

The sound of the shot had galvanized Tom and Larry into action, and with a lightning movement they both stooped, seized their friend and pulled him to them just as the body of the buck struck the ground.

So unnerved were they all by the narrowness of the escape that for several moments no one spoke.

Then Mr. Wilder rallied them by exclaiming:

"See! see! The mist has lifted. There go three more deer up the valley. Come on! Let's see who can bring one down."

The chance for a shot brought even Horace out of his fright, and in a thrice the boys had sighted their rifles and fired. But no deer dropped.

"I hit one, I know I did!" declared Bill. "Let's follow."

"No, shoot again," returned his father. "We have the advantage here from being above."

Again the rifles cracked, and this time one of the deer gave a bound in the air and dropped flat.

"Hooray! We've got another!" cried the lads.

"Don't fire any more. The others are out of range," declared the ranchman.

"Please, just one more," begged Horace.

But his father refused, telling him that a good hunter never shot when there was no hope of bringing down his game.

"Never mind, we've got two," said Larry. "I call that pretty good luck."

And speculating as to whom the credit of hitting the second belonged, they all hastened to where it lay.

CHAPTER IX

THE MESSAGE FROM CROSS-EYED PETE

THE shells shot by the rifles belonging to the two chums were .44-.50, while those of the Wilder boys were .30, so that it would only be possible to tell whether the boys from Ohio had proved better marksmen than the Westerners. Yet the boys were eager to settle the question.

Chaffing each other good naturedly, they tramped along, and when they saw the size of the antlers and body of the second buck they forgot all rivalry.

"He's a beauty!" cried Horace. "I'm glad it wasn't he that made a jump for me. His prongs stick out a yard."

Though this was an exaggeration, the branches of the antlers were, indeed, surprisingly long.

"And there are fourteen of the prongs," ejaculated Tom, who had been counting the sharp points.

"Which makes him fifteen years old," asserted Bill. "Just look at their spread; they must be all of four feet."

"Easily," said his father. "He's the biggest buck I ever saw. Ah, here's the bullet-hole, right back of the shoulder. It certainly was a splendid shot." And as he bent closer to examine it, the others awaited his decision as to which party the trophy belonged.

"Ohio wins!" he declared at last.

"Then Tom probably got him. He's a better marksman that I am," asserted Larry.

Though the Wilder boys were naturally disappointed, they made the best of it, and Bill exclaimed:

"Come on, Larry. Let's go into the woods and search. I'm positive I hit a deer the first time I fired. Can we go, father?"

"Surely, only don't get lost. It will take me some time to dress the two bucks. If you are not back by the time I am finished, come to the plateau. We'll wait for you there."

Promising not to wander far, the elder boys entered the woods while the others assisted in dressing the monster buck.

After skinning the animal, the ranchman cut out the most savory parts and placed them in the pelt.

"Shall we take the antlers?" asked Horace.

"They'd be fine to have mounted, but they'll be awfully in the way while we're hunting. What do you think, Mr. Wilder?" And Tom appealed to him as to their proper disposal.

"They will be awkward to carry, that's a fact," assented the ranchman. "If you want them very much, though, we can leave them here and then stop on our way home. They'll be safe enough till we get back."

Readily Tom agreed, and he and Horace were just stooping to pick up one end of the hide, containing the deer meat, when Horace let out a cry.

"Oh, what's that thing up by my buck?"

"It looks like a tiger," exclaimed Tom, and then added: "But you don't have tigers out here, do you?"

"No. That's a mountain lion, which is almost the same thing, though," answered Mr. Wilder. "Now's your chance to show your marksmanship, Horace. Take a good aim and see if you can't knock him over."

No urging did his son need. Raising his rifle to position, the lad squinted along the barrel carefully and then fired.

Above the report of the shot rang out an ear-

splitting howl, and the mountain lion turned to face the direction of the sound.

"Give him another, son. You hit him, but not in a vital spot," said his father.

Again Horace aimed and fired, this time with better success, for the lion dropped in its tracks.

"Good work," praised Tom heartily. "That was a mighty long shot to make. Now if Bill and Larry only get something, we'll have bagged a trophy."

Elated at his success, Horace was starting toward his prize when his father called him back to help carry the pelt.

"My, but he's a beauty!" declared the younger of the chums when they reached the carcass. "I should hate to come across one suddenly."

"They are not pleasant customers to meet," smiled Mr. Wilder. "I'm glad this fellow didn't visit us last night. Though why he passed the horses by I don't know. Mountain lions are great ones for horse or cattle flesh. While I am dressing the buck you boys had better climb up to the plateau and see that our ponies are all right. Take some of the meat with you and then we won't be obliged to make so many trips."

With a piece of meat in one hand and a rifle in the other, the lads started up the trail and, though

they went bravely enough, each in his heart was a bit frightened.

"Pete says mountain lions usually travel in pairs, so keep your eyes peeled," advised Horace.

But though they imagined several times they heard the purr of one of the prowlers, they reached the plateau without adventure.

The ponies were huddled together, tails to the rocks, and were sniffing the air in obvious uneasiness.

"Steady, boys, steady," called Horace soothingly. And setting down his meat, he patted each reassuringly.

The presence of the boys was an evident relief to the ponies, and after a few minutes they began to champ grass again.

"That lion must have come quite near, to scare 'em so," asserted the young rancher. "Pete says ponies are almost as good as dogs for watching, and I believe him. They can smell things, oh, way off." And sitting down, Horace entertained his companion with stories of the keen scent of horses, which lost none of their color because of his lively imagination. Indeed, he succeeded in getting them both so worked up that when Mr. Wilder's hat appeared above the edge of the plateau each boy seized his rifle and aimed at it.

"What are you going to do, hold me up?" laughed the ranchman as he saw the barrels leveled at him, and then, as he noted the alarm on their faces, he added: "Steady! Put your guns down carefully."

Laughing nervously, the boys obeyed.

"You are a fine lot, you are," he chided, "to leave me to bring up all the meat alone. Why didn't you come back?"

In explanation Horace told how they had found the ponies and said they had stayed to quiet them.

"And I'll wager you've been relating some wonderful yarns for Tom's benefit, judging from the way you received me. Now, boys," he continued seriously, "when you are in the mountains you must never talk about things that will excite you. There are so many things that can happen. A man always needs to be cool and collected, so that if emergency does arise he can think quickly and well."

This bit of advice made a deep impression on the lads and they promised to remember it.

The sun was high in the heavens and its heat was becoming terrific.

"Fetch the horses and come into the woods," commanded Mr. Wilder. "We'll get dinner ready and wait for Bill and Larry where it's cool."

"Why it's a quarter of twelve," said Tom, looking at his watch. "I had no idea it was so late."

"Time flies when you are hunting," returned the ranchman, "a fact that you should remember, and with it that darkness falls quickly in the mountains."

The ponies were nothing loath to move from the broiling plateau to the cooler woods and stood contentedly, now and then nibbling the leaves and tender twigs from the trees near them.

Lighting a fire, Mr. Wilder soon had a choice slice of venison broiling in the saucepan, and the aroma was so good that the boys could hardly wait to taste the meat.

At last it was ready, and they ate it ravenously.

"How much better it tastes when you've shot it yourself," declared Tom. "I've had venison before, but it wasn't nearly so good as this."

"A keen appetite and the mountain air certainly do give a zest to your food," smiled the ranchman. "I reckon I'll put another slice on the fire so it will be ready for the boys when they come."

But it was fully an hour later before they heard the others hail.

"Up here in the woods," called back Tom and Horace, running to the edge of the forest to guide them to the camp.

It was several minutes before Larry and Bill came in sight, and before they did the others had learned that they had found the deer Bill thought he had hit.

"I ran across it," explained Larry. "It's hind leg was broken and it was lying down when I came upon it. The poor thing tried to jump up, but it couldn't very well."

"But I didn't hear any shot," interrupted Tom. "I've been listening, too."

"Good reason why, because it was way over in another basin," answered his brother. "It must have been all of three miles from here, don't you think so, Bill?"

"Easily."

"Then how did you follow it?" demanded Horace.

"By its blood and where its leg dragged."

"Well, I'm glad you found the poor creature and put it out of misery," declared his father. "That's the only objection I have to deer hunting—the animals have such wonderful vitality that they travel miles and miles after being crippled and then drop from exhaustion, like this one. As a usual thing, I don't allow any one to fire at a deer unless at short range. I made an exception this morning, but I never will again."

"We didn't bring much of the meat back, it was too long a haul," said Bill after he had partially satisfied his hunger.

"We have plenty," returned his father. "In fact, we have so much that we won't fire at any more deer."

"Then what can we hunt?" protested Horace.

"Bear," returned his father.

"Oh, goody! and mountain lions! Say, you deer slayers, you may have knocked over some bucks, but it took me to stop a mountain lion."

"So you were the one who got him, eh?" asked Bill. "He must have been asleep. You can't hit a deer, and yet you got a mountain lion, which is smaller."

"He wasn't asleep, and I made a dandy long shot. Tom said so," declared his brother hotly.

"You certainly did well, son," interposed his father.

"Then we've all bagged something, if you can call my getting the deer Bill wounded a hit," said Larry. "This is sure jim dandy hunting. Back home you can tramp all day without even seeing a woodchuck."

Heartily the others laughed at this statement of the difference in hunting grounds, and for an hour or so they talked and joked.

"Are we going to camp here for the night?" inquired Horace at last of his father.

"No. I reckon we'll go farther into the mountains. We'll have a better chance for bear there. This is a little too near the plains."

Well rested, the boys were eager to be on the move and gladly they made ready to advance.

In and out among the hills the trail wound, and sundown found them entering a basin similar to that where they had captured their deer. On two sides walls of rocks towered and dense forests formed the others.

Lonesome, indeed, was the spot, and this effect was heightened by the rapidly descending darkness.

"Commander, I think we'll hobble the horses right here," said Mr. Wilder, dismounting in the center of the vale. "It would also be a good idea to have our camp fire close beside them. Then, if any prowler smells the deer meat or the horses, it can't reach either without our knowing it. And, because we must keep a fire all night, we shall need a lot of wood."

Recalled to the fact that he was in charge of the camp, Tom said:

"You fellows come with me and get the wood. I guess Mr. Wilder will attend to the horses, and

we four can gather enough before it gets real dark."

Quickly the boys dismounted and ran to get dry limbs and branches, making a monster pile.

"I reckon that's enough, commander," said the ranchman at last, "and, besides, supper is ready or will be when the coffee is poured."

"Coffee! Where did you get the water to boil it?" queried Larry.

"From the canteens. I filled them this morning."

"And here I've been wondering where we could look for water. I was surprised you didn't tell Tom to send some of us."

Being less tired than the night before, the boys sat round the camp fire after supper, talking and listening to the stories the ranchman told about his life as a soldier.

When at length they were ready to turn in, they rolled themselves up in their blankets and formed a circle about the fire.

Without adventure they passed the night, sleeping till long after sunrise, there being no occasion for getting an early start.

Indeed as they ate breakfast they were debating whether to push on or stay where they were and

set a bear trap when they were surprised to hear Mr. Wilder's name called.

Shouting in return, they jumped to their feet, trying to see who had hailed them.

"It's some one on horseback. I can hear the click of horsehoes on the stones," declared Larry.

"Some one from the ranch probably," asserted Mr. Wilder, and the next moment his opinion was confirmed by Horace, who had run to the trail and was returning, yelling:

"It's Nails! It's Nails!"

"He's one of our boys," explained Bill to the chums. "What do you suppose he can want, father?"

"Wait till he tells us. There are so many possibilities, it's no use trying to guess."

Their suspense was short-lived, for in a few moments the cowboy called Nails dashed into the basin, his pony in a lather.

Realizing from this condition of his mount that something serious was amiss, Mr. Wilder asked:

"What's wrong, Nails?"

"Cattle thieves!" gasped the cowboy. "Cross-eyed Pete said to get everybody you could and meet him at the Witches' Pool to-morrow morning. He's driving up the herds from the Long Creek bottoms."

CHAPTER X

THE RETURN TO THE RANCH

THE knowledge that his herds had again been raided by cattle thieves made Mr. Wilder very angry.

"This makes the third time some of my cattle have been stolen. The thieves will find it is three times and out. I'll take their trail this time and stick to it till I round them all up."

Never had Bill and Horace seen their father so wrought up, and they wisely held their peace while the cowboy who had brought the news of the raid busied himself removing the saddle and bridle and wiping the lather from his pony.

Before Nails had finished the task, however, the ranchman had regained control of himself.

"I am glad Pete is driving the cattle home," he said quietly. "They will graze about the Witches' Pool without watching, so I can take all the boys with me, and the more there are of us the less

trouble we will have. Sit down and eat breakfast, Nails, and then tell me about the raid."

No urging did the cowboy need, for he had not tasted a mouthful since he had left the herd, twenty-four hours before. He had expected to find the ranchman at his home, and when he learned Mr. Wilder had gone on a hunting trip he only stopped long enough to change ponies and then started again to find him.

Attentively the boys waited on him, impatient to hear his story.

"It was night before last it happened," said Nails, after having eaten more than it seemed possible for one man. "All during the day the cattle had been restless and we boys were kept on the jump holding 'em together. But with the darkness they quieted down and we all turned in.

"When morning came, nary a steer was in sight. It didn't take us long to get after 'em, and in about an hour we found them. But the short-horned Durhams were missing."

"The best cattle in the herd," interrupted Mr. Wilder.

"Just what Pete said, but not in the same words," grinned Nails.

"But how do you know they were stolen?" asked

Bill. "Perhaps they only wandered off. You said the herd had been restless."

"A hundred head don't all go together," replied the cowboy. "Besides, after looking around, we found the hoofprints of seven ponies."

"Which way did they drive?" demanded the ranchman.

"Toward old Mex. But I reckon that's only a bluff. It's my idea the headquarters of this gang are right in these mountains, somewhere. Pete thinks so, too. That's why he set the pool as the meeting place. There's an old trail he knows and he wants to strike it, you agreeing of course," he added, looking toward the ranchman.

"We'll decide about that later. But if Pete suggested it, he has some good reason. Still, I can't see the necessity of getting any of the neighbors. It will only take time, and we can save twenty-four hours by riding straight to the pool from here."

"The reason for getting others is because the Half-Moon isn't the only herd that's been raided."

At this statement the Wilders were amazed.

"By the tracks from the direction of the Three Stars there must have been two hundred, at least, lifted from them."

"Then Jim Snider and his outfit are on the trail by this time," declared the ranchman.

"No, they aren't. I saw Sandy the other day, and he said they were all going up to Tolopah to bring down a herd Snider brought from Montana. It's my idea the thieves knew this and planned a wholesale raid."

"H—m. That sounds likely," commented Mr. Wilder. "Who do you think is at the head of it, Nails?"

"Gus Megget. He's the only one with the nerve to pull it off."

At the mention of the ruffian cow-puncher the boys looked at one another and then at their father, who said:

"That can't be, Nails. Megget tried some of his funny business with these two boys, Larry and Tom Alden, up in Oklahoma the other day."

"And they made a monkey of him," interposed Horace gleefully.

"What, them two?" returned the cowboy, looking at the brothers with keen interest.

"They certainly did," smiled the ranchman. "So I reckon we can't blame Megget for this raid."

"But he could have come by train, the short line, you know."

"We'll find out in time. There's no use argu-

ing, Nails," said the ranchman. "Bill, bring up Buster and Blackhawk. Tom, you will have to take Nails' pony. We must get back to the ranch as soon as possible and that other horse is too played out.

"You boys can pack up and follow as fast as you can. Be at the house by the middle of the afternoon, at the latest. Mind now, I have enough to think of without worrying about you."

Nails was helping Bill with the ponies, and almost as soon as Mr. Wilder had finished his instructions the animals were ready.

Vaulting into the saddle, the ranchman again cautioned the boys to be careful, shook out his reins and rode from the basin at a gallop, the cowboy close behind.

With a will the four comrades went to work packing the saddle bags, and less than an hour after the others had left were following them.

The raid, the pursuit, wonder if they would be allowed to go on the man-hunt and speculation as to whether the thieves would be captured formed topics for endless conversation as they rode.

"Do you suppose those men I saw on the cliff are part of the gang?" hazarded Tom.

"They may be. I never thought of them," declared Bill. "I must remember to speak about

them to father. Still, I hardly think they could have had a hand in it. It is all of thirty miles from where we saw them to the Long Creek bottoms, and no sizeable herd of cattle could be driven through the hills that far in a day. Twenty miles on the prairies is a stiff hike and half that far would be a good drive in the mountains."

When they were obliged to ride Indian file over the trail much talking was not attempted, and each boy busied himself with his own thoughts.

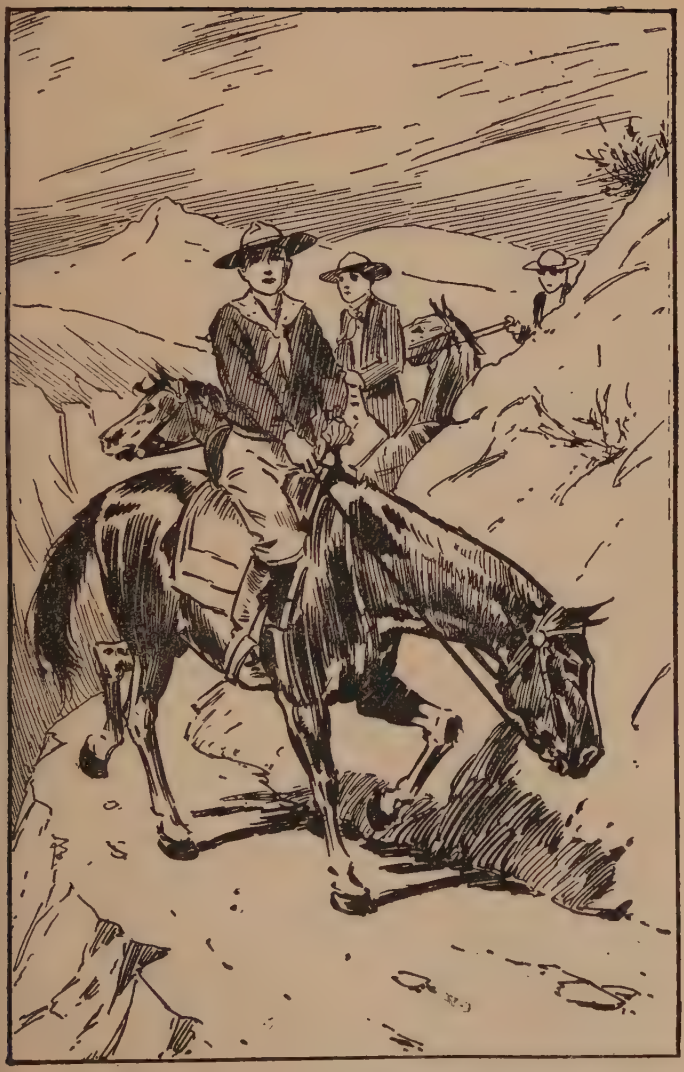
Because of his knowledge of the route, Bill led and Larry brought up the rear. Their advance was slow, however, as they wished to give the pony Tom rode as much chance to rest as possible before they reached the plains.

With eyes and ears alert, they proceeded, and without mishap finally rode out onto the prairie.

"Let's eat now," suggested Horace. "That will give Whitefoot more rest, and by the time we have finished he'll be as good as new. He's a tough one and can stand sixty miles, day in and day out."

"Which is about half as much as he'll get this time," added Bill. "Still I think Whitefoot's good for it, especially as he hadn't been ridden for a week till Nails took him last night."

The halt was made and the boys ate as heartily



"WITH EYES AND EARS ALERT, THEY PROCEEDED."

Page 98.

as though they had not breakfasted only three hours before.

When they were ready to start again Larry said:

"So long as Whitefoot is tired and Horace is the lightest, don't you think he'd better ride him instead of Tom?"

"Good idea," acquiesced Bill, and the shift in mounts was made, after which the boys headed for the ranch house.

As they were starting on the long forty-mile ride, Mr. Wilder and Nails were ending it. Though forced to ride carefully so long as they were on the mountain trail, when the latter reached the plains they had "cut loose." Both were expert horsemen and the ponies under them were mettlesome. Indeed, Blackhawk had not entirely recovered his temper since his roping and it was he that set the pace. Yet the riders did not allow the ponies to run themselves out in the first few miles, holding them down to a long, steady lope that covered the ground rapidly.

"Where do you suppose we are the most likely to strike the outfit from the Three Stars, at home or in Tolopah?" asked Mr. Wilder after a time.

"At home. They were to get the cattle day before yesterday, and Sandy told me they planned to

stay at the ranch to-day to pack grub so as to save a trip of the wagon."

"Then we ought to find the whole crew at home."

"That's just what Pete and I were banking on," returned Nails.

This point settled, the ranchman refused further conversation, to the disappointment of his companion, occupying himself with mapping out his campaign.

After a time the ponies began to slacken their stride, but the vigorous rowelling they received from the spurs of the men on their backs told them they were bound on pressing business, and they responded gamely.

"I hope Ned is at home," Mr. Wilder exclaimed suddenly. "If he isn't, there won't be any but slow ponies in the corral. And that means it will take me the whole afternoon to get to the Three Stars."

"No, it don't," asserted Nails. "I kinder thought you might be off somewhere, so I cut out three ponies from the bunch and brought them up with me. When they told me you were hunting with the kids, I naturally knew you wouldn't go far into the mountains, so I left the best ones at the Half-Moon."

This foresight of his cowboy pleased the ranchman, and he commended him heartily.

"You seem to have a pretty level head, Nails. What do you make of these raids on my herd? This makes the third. It rather seems to me as though the thieves had marked me for their particular victim."

"That's my idea exactly," declared the cowboy. "And that's what makes me so sure Gus Megget had a hand in the raid."

"But what grudge has Megget against me?" asked Mr. Wilder in surprise.

"You are the one who leased the Long Creek bottoms, aren't you?" returned Nails, answering the question, Yankee fashion, by another.

"To be sure. But what has that to do with it?"

"Everything. Megget's been rustling cattle for years, and the Long Creek bottoms were where he used to drive the cattle he'd lifted. If any one jumped him, he could either cross the line into old Mex or strike out for the mountains. Maybe you don't know it, but there's a greaser just across the line—they call him Don Vasquez—who makes a fat living buying stolen cattle. He's got some old Indian remedy for making hair grow, and he cuts out the old brands, makes hair grow out and then burns in his three crosses."

"And so my leasing the bottoms has spoiled this criminal dealing?"

"That's what. I heard a greaser down in El Paso last winter boasting you'd sell your ranch inside of two years."

"Why didn't you tell me?" demanded Mr. Wilder severely.

"Didn't think it was necessary. Fatty and I fixed him so he wouldn't brag any more."

Deeming it unwise to inquire into the means taken for silencing the Mexican, the ranchman lapsed into silence for a few minutes and then declared:

"No cattle thieves can drive me out of business, Nails. I have the right on my side, and right always triumphs."

"We boys are with you, Mr. Wilder. You've always played more than fair with us, which is more than we can say of some folks, and we appreciate it. Cowboys have feelings same as other people, though there seem to be a lot of folks who don't think so. And I'm speaking for the other boys of the Half-Moon as well as myself. We talked it all over before Pete sent me to the ranch. But when you join 'em at the pool, don't say anything about what I've told you. Sentiment and hunting cattle thieves don't mix."

This expression of the esteem in which his men held him, crude though it was, moved Mr. Wilder deeply, and reaching over, he seized the cowboy's hand and shook it warmly, an action that delighted Nails greatly.

The statement about Megget gave the ranchman a new train of thought. He realized for the first time that he was engaged in a cattle war which would only end with his ruin or the capture of the entire band of thieves. And being a man who could not be frightened, the owner of the Half-Moon Ranch vowed to accomplish the latter alternative.

The hard ride was tiring the ponies, wiry though they were, and the men on their backs were obliged to resort to almost continual use of their spurs. But at last the buildings of the ranch home came into view, and soon Mr. Wilder and Nails were at the corral.

"Saddle the best of the bunch for me," ordered the ranchman as he dismounted. "I'll go to the house for a bite and then start for the Three Stars."

"What about me?" inquired the cowboy, disappointment in his voice at the thought of being left behind.

"I want you to ride into Tolopah. Don't say

anything about the raid. Just listen round and see if you can learn anything." And turning on his heel, Mr. Wilder started for the house.

"Where are the boys? You didn't let them stay to hunt, did you?" inquired his wife anxiously as he sat down at the table and ordered Hop Joy to bring him something to eat.

"No. They'll be here during the afternoon. I'm going to get Jim Snider and his outfit. Nails says they are at home." And briefly he told her of the information he had received from his cowboy.

No longer than necessary did the ranchman linger at the table, and when he had finished a hasty meal went out, mounted the pony Nails held waiting and galloped away in the direction of the Three Stars Ranch, which lay to the east.

Having far less to go, the cowboy ate leisurely and then rode toward Tolopah.

In the meantime the four boys were making the best time they could, but before they had covered half the distance Whitefoot gave out completely.

For a time they proceeded, with Horace riding now with one boy and now with another. But it was slow work, and at last Bill suggested that he ride on ahead, get fresh horses and return. After some argument, this plan was agreed upon.

As she saw her elder son ride up alone, Mrs.

Wilder was greatly alarmed, but he quickly reassured her, and with Ned's help caught two ponies, saddled them and went back to meet the others, all reaching the house a little later.

CHAPTER XI

PREPARATIONS FOR PURSUIT

"Oh, dear! Father and Nails have gone!" exclaimed Horace as he counted the ponies in the corral while the others were unsaddling. "Now we can't go with them. I was afraid that was what father intended when he didn't wait for us."

"But Buster and Blackhawk are here, and there is one more pony than before," returned Larry.

"That doesn't prove anything. Ned told me Nails brought in three extra ponies with him," said Bill.

"Then you have known all the time that father and Nails were gone and never told us?" demanded Horace.

"It was because I didn't know for certain where they had gone that I said nothing," replied his brother. "Ned was away when they arrived and departed. Here comes mother; you can find out from her."

After returning Mrs. Wilder's greetings and giving her a brief account of the trip, Horace asked:

"How long have father and Nails been gone? I think it was mean of them to give us the slip like that."

"But they haven't gone to the hills yet," returned his mother. "Your father has ridden over to the Three Stars and Nails has gone to Tolopah."

"Oh, goody!" exclaimed Horace. "We may be able to go, after all. Momsy, won't you try to make father take us?"

It was only with this last question that Mrs. Wilder understood the purpose of her son's eager inquiries, and the disclosure did not tend to quiet the anxiety she felt over the outcome of the pursuit. Yet she only said:

"That is a question for your father to decide. I think, though, that you would want to stay here and protect me."

"But you are in no danger, Momsy. Besides, Ned and Hop Joy are here."

The thought of the Chinaman as a protector made the other boys laugh, and realizing that they could not count on her espousal of their cause, they went off to the wagon sheds to devise a plan to win permission from the ranchman.

As the owner of the Half-Moon galloped up to the ranch house of the Three Stars his horse literally dripping water, Jim Snider and his cowboys ran up from all directions to learn the cause of such evident hard riding.

To the accompaniment of various exclamations of anger and surprise Mr. Wilder hurriedly told his neighbors of the raid.

"That's Megget's work!" ejaculated Snider as the story was completed. "He's the only one cute enough and with nerve enough to do it. I didn't suppose any one knew my herd was unwatched, yet the minute my boys ride in the gang raids it. Wilder, if you and I are to stay on our ranches, we must round up these cattle thieves."

"That's my idea exactly," declared the owner of the Half-Moon. "That's why I rode over. My boys and I start to-morrow morning, and I want to know how many from the Three Stars will go with me."

"Every man jack of us, save the cook and grub man," replied Snider. "That makes nine."

"Good! We'll ride back to the Half-Moon for supper and then go to the pool. The sooner we start the better. If you'll lend me a fresh pony, I can travel faster."

Without waiting for orders from their master,

the boys of the Three Stars ran to the corral, all agog with the excitement at the unexpected turn of affairs.

When the two ranch owners were alone Mr. Wilder imparted his information about Megget's enmity and the Mexican, Don Vasquez.

The facts amazed the proprietor of the Three Stars and the two men were discussing the evident declaration of a cattle war, especially against the Half-Moon, when the cowboys trotted up with the ponies.

Deeming the information too important for general discussion with the men, the ranch owners swung into their saddles, changing their topic of conversation to the trails that would be the most likely to be taken by the raiders.

Never sparing their mounts, they reached the Half-Moon just at dusk and their arrival threw the boys into great excitement.

"Has Nails returned?" asked Mr. Wilder of Ned.

"Not yet."

"Send him to me when he comes. Make the boys from the Three Stars at home in the bunkhouse and tell Hop Joy to give us supper as soon as he can. Also have him pack some bacon, sugar, coffee, crackers and doughnuts, enough to last the

Half-Moon outfit a week. When it's ready, hitch up and carry it to Pete at the Witches' Pool.

"Hello! Glad you lads arrived all right," he added as he caught sight of the boys. "Any trouble?"

"Nothing, only Whitefoot gave out. I had to come on and get another pony," replied Bill.

"Good! Snider, I want you to know Larry and Tom Alden," continued Mr. Wilder, introducing the boys, adding in a low voice: "They are the lads about whom I told you."

"I'm sure glad to meet you," declared the owner of the Three Stars, giving each of the lads a grip that made their hands ache.

Upon arrival he had exchanged greetings with Bill and Horace, and altogether they trooped onto the veranda, whence they were summoned to supper before the lads had the opportunity to ask Mr. Wilder whether they could accompany him or not.

Evincing a lively interest in the two Eastern boys, the Three Stars' owner plied them with questions about Ohio and was so impressed with their answers that he extended a cordial invitation to them and the Wilder boys to pay him a visit at his ranch, promising to have his men give an exhibition of "broncho busting" for their special benefit, an invitation which all four eagerly accepted.

Just as they were ready to rise from the table Hop Joy glided in.

"Nail, he backee," he announced. "Say he got heap talkee."

"Tell him to come round to the veranda," ordered Mr. Wilder. "By the way, how are you coming along with the cooking, Hop Joy?"

"Allee lightee. Bymeby, two hours maybe."

"Well, don't be any longer. The sooner Ned can start, the sooner he'll reach the Pool."

In answer the celestial bowed low, then turned and left the room.

CHAPTER XII

WHAT NAILS LEARNED

WHILE the ranchmen and Mrs. Wilder made themselves comfortable in chairs, the boys squatted or stretched out on the piazza, their restlessness proclaiming the expectancy with which they awaited the "heap talkee" Nails desired to impart.

The cowboy soon appeared, and, after seating himself at Mr. Wilder's bidding, launched into an account of what he had learned in Tolopah.

"There are twenty of them in the gang," he said, "and Megget has joined them by this time, though he wasn't with them when they made the raids. As near as I could make out, their headquarters are in the Lost Lode Mine. There are three trails to it, one leading in somewhere near the trail you all took on your hunting trip and the others to the south, along which they drive the cattle they steal. I——"

"Mr. Wilder, you don't suppose that could be

the trail where I saw those men crossing the face of the cliff, do you?" interrupted Tom.

"I shouldn't doubt it a bit. I'd forgotten about them entirely." And he briefly told Snider of the figures they all had seen, adding: "Much obliged for reminding me, Tom. That may have been Megget and the fellows you met with him. Go on, Nails; anything more?"

"Nothing but that it's my opinion they have a spy in Tolopah who keeps 'em mighty well informed on the happenings at the Half-Moon and Three Stars ranches."

At the words Mr. Wilder and his neighbor exchanged significant glances.

"What makes you think so?" the latter asked. "Where did you learn all this, anyhow?"

"Oh, just nosing round," drawled Nails, but his tone suggested that he was sure of his information and at the same time unwilling to disclose its source.

"You certainly did well, Nails," complimented his master. "Knowing how many there are in the gang will enable us to lay definite plans for action. Now go and get your supper. I suppose you have seen the boys from the Three Stars in the bunkhouse?"

"I could hear 'em half way to Tolopah."

"Then tell them we'll start. At what time do you think Pete will reach the pool?"

"About midnight."

"Good. Be ready to move by ten o'clock."

"And tell my outfit to make less noise," added Mr. Snider.

Until they could hear the other cowboys greeting Nails the two men were silent, and then Mr. Wilder declared:

"I had no idea Megget had twenty men with him. It's a good thing we found out.

"Let's see, there are nine of you from the Three Stars; nine of my boys and myself. That makes nineteen."

"And the four of us, that makes twenty-three," added Horace, deeming the moment auspicious for settling the question that was uppermost in the minds of all the lads.

"Your arithmetic is better than your facts," laughed his father.

"Oh, can't we go, *please?* If Megget should see Larry and Tom, he might run and——"

"On the contrary, I'm afraid he might try to wipe out the disgrace they put upon him. No, my son, it's going to be a hard trip. If you were along I should be worrying about you all the time. Besides," he added, noting the keen disappoint-

ment his refusal brought, "I shall need you here so you can ride down to the pool every day and see that the cattle and horses are all right."

"That's well enough for the others. They would be in the way, but I wouldn't," protested Bill. "I'm old enough and strong enough to go, and the experience would do me good. If you take it, it will make just twenty on both sides."

"What do you think, Jim, shall we take Bill or not?"

As the boys awaited the answer of their friend, it was so still the fall of a pin could have been heard.

But their suspense did not last long.

With a drawl that was tantalizingly deliberate the owner of the Three Stars Ranch replied:

"I reckon we might as well. Bill's got a level head on his shoulders, and some day he'll be boss of the Half-Moon. If anything like this happens then he'll know how to act. Yes, I think we'd better take him."

Aware that it would be useless to try to persuade Mr. Wilder to change his mind in respect to taking them, Tom, Larry and Horace made the most of the fact that they were to inspect the herd daily. But it was poor recompense, and in a few minutes they went off to see how near Ned was ready to

start, stopping to sample Hop Joy's cooking on the way.

"You goee?" asked the Chinaman as the trio entered his kitchen.

"Going to eat," grinned Horace, helping himself to a doughnut and just managing to dodge a potato that Hop Joy tossed at him.

"Shoo! shoo! Lun out! Me bigee hully. No plague! no plague!"

"Poor fellow! It must be some job to get enough food ready for twelve men. Come on, let's leave him alone," said Larry. "I'd like to go down to the bunk-house."

"That's so. Maybe Sandy or some of his boys know the trail to the Lost Lode," agreed Horace. And to the Chinaman's surprise they left him in peace.

The men from the Three Stars were lying in the bunks and sprawling on the benches, getting what rest they could in anticipation of many long hours in the saddle, laughing and talking the while.

At the entrance of the trio the chatter ceased and the cowboys stared at the two Eastern boys with undisguised interest.

"Boys, these are the famous cowboy tamers, Larry and Tom Alden," said Horace, bowing in

feigned deference and indicating his friends with a wave of his hand.

"Don't be afraid, though. We won't try our hands on you unless you get gay with us," declared Larry seriously.

"Thankee, thankee kindly, on behalf of me and my men," bowed Sandy gravely, and then they all burst into a roar of laughter.

Cowboys love a joke, and the words and manner of the brothers, together with their clean-cut faces and manly bearing, appealed to them, winning the way to their good graces as nothing else could.

All reserve thus broken, the men bade the lads sit down.

"I s'pose you'll be going with us?" hazarded Sandy.

"No, father won't let us. He thinks we're only babies. Says he's afraid we'll be in the way. So we've got to stay home and watch the herd at the Witches' Pool."

"You may have your hands full at that," declared one of the cowboys.

"Keep quiet," growled Sandy, frowning at the speaker.

But the remark had suggested all sorts of possibilities to the lads, and, glancing at Tom and Larry, Horace asked:

"What makes you think so?"

Again Sandy cast a look full of meaning at his fellow and the cowboy answered:

"Oh, nothing in particular. I was just talking."

The boys had noted Sandy's glances, however, and the reply only whetted their curiosity.

Drawing himself to his full height and striving to be as severe as possible, Horace said:

"If any of you men know of any trouble that may come to the Half-Moon herd, it is your duty to tell my father before he goes away."

The words and the seriousness of the boy standing before them sent the men into another roar of laughter.

But Sandy hastened to say:

"There's nothing we know, kid. Skinny was only joking."

Horace was about to reply when Hop Joy poked his head through the door, saying:

"Glub all leady, Ned."

"All right, Hop." And springing from his bunk, Ned went out to harness his horses, accompanied by several of the cowboys.

For an hour or so the chums stayed in the bunkhouse, listening to stories of marvelous feats of broncho-busting and whatever else the men pleased

to tell them, only leaving when Nails announced it was time to go to the corral and saddle up.

"Aren't you going with them?" asked Tom.

"No," returned Horace. "We are liable to get hurt, it's so dark. We couldn't see anything if we did go. Besides, father may have some orders to give us."

The only instructions Mr. Wilder had to give, however, were to be careful not to do anything that would cause his wife to worry about them.

"Suppose the herd gets in trouble, what shall we do?" persisted Horace, on whose excited mind the words of the Three Stars' cowboy had made a lasting impression.

"Use your own judgment. But don't let your imagination play tricks on you. The cattle will be all right—unless you get them restless."

"Oh, we won't do that," quickly declared Larry. "We'll take such good care of them, you will want to hire us as cowboys when you get back."

The shouts from the corral told the ranchmen that the time for the start had arrived, and quickly they made themselves ready, while Hop Joy appeared to say he had sent saddle bags with food for Mr. Wilder and Bill by Ned.

With a great clatter of hoofs, the cowboys rode up. The Wilders and Mr. Snider bade a hurried

good-by, mounted and galloped away into the darkness of the night, with the wishes of Mrs. Wilder and the boys for success and a speedy return ringing in their ears.

CHAPTER XIII

OUT ON THE PLAINS

UNLIKE the night when the hunting party had ridden over the plains, black clouds covered the sky, making the darkness so intense that the riders could not see fifty feet ahead of them. But Mr. Wilder and Nails knew the route well, so that the absence of the moon made no great difference.

That they need not tire their mounts by hard riding, Mr. Wilder had purposely set the start early and, with Snider on one side and Bill on the other, he led the cavalcade, setting the pace at a slow lope.

Now and then the cowboys talked or laughed, but for the most part they were silent, the creak of the saddle leathers and the swish of the horses' legs as they brushed through the grass being the only sounds to tell that a body of men were riding through the darknesss.

So lonesome was the ranch house after the de-

parture of the party that, though they made several attempts to talk, Horace and the two Eastern lads finally decided to go to bed, to the evident relief of Mrs. Wilder.

But sleep did not come to Larry and Tom, and as they lay tossing and turning, the former asked:

"Do you think that fellow they call Skinny really meant there was any danger threatening the herd at the Witches' Pool?"

"I don't believe so," replied Tom. "I suppose there is always the chance that a lot of things may happen to a big herd like that. Some of them might try to wander away or they might get frightened and stampede. I read about a stampede once where the cattle ran right over the edge of a cliff."

"Well, they couldn't do that at the pool, because there aren't any cliffs near there," replied Tom.

Larry was not satisfied, however, and said:

"I wonder what cowboys do to stop a stampede? I wish we'd thought to ask Mr. Wilder."

"Don't always be looking for trouble, Larry," protested his brother.

"Still, we ought to know. He said he'd hold us responsible for the cattle."

"We can ask Ned when he gets back, if you really want to know. But don't, for goodness sake let Horace hear you. His imagination is so

lively that he would think it was a stampede every time the cattle moved. I think it was because Horace is so excitable that Mr. Wilder had us stay home. He probably thought we were older and could steady him down. Now don't try to think up any more things that might happen. I'm tired and want to go to sleep." And turning his back to his brother, Tom refused to talk any more.

Out on the prairie the body of horsemen were riding silently and steadily.

"I hope we shall not be obliged to wait long for Pete," said Bill, giving voice to his thoughts.

"He'll be on hand, barring accidents," returned his father.

This confidence of the owner of the Half-Moon in his foreman was justified, when, at the end of another hour, the men caught the flare of a camp fire in the direction of the pool.

"Must have hurried some," asserted Snider.

But this comment elicited no other response than a quickening of the pace.

When they were within a mile of the fire Mr. Wilder drew rein.

"You boys wait here," he commanded. "I haven't any doubt but that it's Pete's fire. Still, it won't pay to take any chances. Snider and I will ride ahead to reconnoiter. If we are not back

within half an hour, you'll know it's all right and can follow."

Little relishing the enforced halt, the cowboys, however, obeyed, some of them dismounting and stretching out in the grass.

Riding a rod or so from the others, Bill, Nails and Sandy eagerly peered through the darkness, listening intently for any sound that should indicate danger.

The two ranch owners, being experienced in the art of scouting, rode to the left into a roll of the plains, one crest of which shut them off from the light. For they were aware that should they ride in its glare they would be seen by whoever was about the fire, and they wished to make sure it was Pete and his men at the pool before disclosing themselves.

But their caution was unnecessary. When they had covered only a little more than half the distance the lowing of cattle broke on their ears.

"That's the Half-Moon outfit, sure enough," declared Snider. And putting spurs to their ponies, the ranch owners galloped straight for the fire.

"Queer we can't see any of the boys," muttered Mr. Wilder in a low voice. "I know they are tired. But, all things considered, one of them at least ought to be on watch if for nothing else than

to keep the cattle from breaking away. That they are restless, you can tell from their lowing.

"It's no wonder the raiders were able to cut out my short-horned Durhams if the boys didn't keep better watch."

His tone showed deep annoyance, and he was on the point of speaking again when a sharp challenge rang out from their left:

"Who goes there?"

Instantly Mr. Wilder's anger vanished as he recognized the voice of his foreman and replied:

"Don't get excited, Pete. It's only Jim Snider and me."

In response to his master's greeting the cowboy sprang to his feet and a movement of his hand toward his belt showed both ranchmen that he had been prepared to dispute their advance should they have proven foes instead of friends.

"Where are the others? You two didn't come alone, did you? I told Nails to have you get as many as you could," said the foreman.

"We left them back yonder," returned the owner of the Half-Moon. "Nails said we were to meet you in the morning, and when we saw the fire Jim and I thought we'd make sure it was you."

"Well, I'm glad you've come," responded Pete.

"Now we can get on the trail so much the sooner. How many did you bring?"

"Nine from the Three Stars, including Jim, Bill, Nails and myself. With your boys that will make twenty, just the number of the raiders."

As he uttered the last words Mr. Wilder expected his foreman to evince surprise, but instead he and Snider were the ones to be taken aback as Pete remarked:

"So Nails found out, did he? What else did he? What else did he learn?"

Briefly the owner of the Half-Moon reported the information Nails had gleaned at Tolopah and then told him of the opinions he and the proprietor of the Three Stars had formed.

"You got the lay of the land down to the last sage brush," declared the foreman. "But we will put a crimp in Megget's plans that he will not forget. My men are asleep by the fire, so there is no use waking them till we've decided what to do."

"Then we must get down to business," returned his master. "I told the boys to ride up unless we returned in half an hour."

A moment there was silence, as though each were waiting for the other to make some suggestion as to the best course to pursue, and then Mr. Wilder said:

"So long as we know the headquarters are in the Lost Lode Mine, it seems to me we had better strike for it direct. Nails told me you knew some trail." And he looked at Pete.

"I know trails enough, but which is the one that leads to the Lost Lode, I can't say. That's just the trouble. It would take a month of Sundays to ride them all down. While we were driving the cattle up here, I was trying to figure out which trail to take in case Nails found the mine was the place."

"You have tried some of the trails, haven't you, Pete?" inquired the owner of the Three Stars.

"Sure. There are six I know that don't lead to the mine. That leaves three between the pool and the Long Creek bottoms, and it may be any one of them."

"Why do you think so?" asked his master.

"Because I know the right trail is between the pool and the bottoms."

Again the men lapsed into silence, which Mr. Snider broke by inquiring:

"What was it that young Alden mentioned about men crossing the cliff?"

"That's so. I'd forgotten it again," and quickly Mr. Wilder narrated the incident to his foreman.

"Probably that was Megget," asserted Pete. "But that doesn't help us much. We don't know

where that trail breaks on the plains. Besides, while we practically know the headquarters are near the old mine, we don't know they are driving the cattle there. They may be heading straight for Don Vasquez's ranch.

"The plan that I kind of made up was to follow the trail from the bottoms till we were sure which way the raiders were headed. If it's for the mine, we can ride back along the plains and try out my three trails."

"But why not follow the cattle?" interrupted Mr. Wilder.

"Because I'd rather head them off than creep up on them. The raiders will be expecting us from behind. By riding on the prairie we can cover ten miles to their one, which will give us time to try out the three trails, and, when we find the right one, we can get in ahead and block the trail."

CHAPTER XIV

ANOTHER DISCOVERY

For several minutes the ranch owners discussed the suggestion and finally decided to act on it unless circumstances should make a change advisable.

Having settled the matter, they rode to the fire and aroused the sleeping cowboys, being joined a few minutes later by Bill, Sandy and the others. Soon the men of the Half-Moon were saddling their ponies.

"Queer we don't meet Ned anywhere," Bill exclaimed. "I see from the bags he's been here, Pete."

"He got here all right, but he didn't like to go back very well. Had a bad case of nerves, so he took down the white awning."

"It's just as well," returned Mr. Wilder. Then, finding that the men were impatient to be on the move, he gave the command to start and they rode toward the Long Creek bottoms.

When Tom and Larry awoke it was bright daylight.

"Why it's nine o'clock," exclaimed Larry in amazement as he looked at his watch.

Hastily the brothers dressed and then went to see if Horace was in his room or had played some joke on them in letting them sleep. To their relief, they found him in bed.

"Hey, you, get up!" cried Tom. "You're a fine one to be in charge of the Half-Moon Ranch. If you stay in bed much longer, it will be dark."

Deeply chagrined to think he had overslept, Horace leaped to the floor, and soon the three boys were ready for breakfast.

At the sound of their voices Mrs. Wilder had ordered Hop Joy to bring in their food, and as the lads entered the dining-room she was awaiting them.

"Why didn't you call us?" protested Horace.

"Because I thought you were all tired and that sleep would do you good."

"And I suppose if Larry or Tom hadn't happened to wake up, you would have let us sleep all day?"

"I suppose I should," said his mother, smiling. "When you are in bed I know that you are safe."

"You must not worry about us, Mrs. Wilder,"

interposed Larry. "I always tell mother that we are old enough to take care of ourselves. So I wish you would feel the same. I think it would save you no end of anxiety."

"Undoubtedly. But I never can think of my Horace except as my baby."

"Huh! I'm a pretty husky baby," grunted the boy. "See here, mother, I'm fifteen now, so I wish you'd stop calling me your baby. When a fellow has been put in charge of the Half-Moon herd he doesn't like to be called a baby."

"I'll try to remember," returned Mrs. Wilder gently. Yet there was a wistfulness in her voice that caused Horace to look up, and, at the sight of her face, he left his chair, ran and put his arm around her neck, exclaiming:

"If you want to call me baby, you can, Momsy! I don't care. Tom and Larry are the right stuff and they won't laugh."

Ere either of the brothers could reply Hop Joy appeared.

"Ned he goee pool," he announced. "Say if you boys wantee go, you hully."

"Tell him to bring up Blackhawk, Lightning and Lady Belle. Then put up some food for us, Hop Joy. Plenty of it, mind."

As the Chinaman glided from the room Mrs. Wilder asked:

"Why do you take anything except for lunch, son?"

"Because I think we will spend the night at the pool. Larry and Tom want to see the will-o'-the-wisps, and we may be able to catch some fish early to-morrow morning. You know father always says early morning is the only time to fish in the pool."

"Well, I don't suppose it will do any harm for you to be gone over night. Only be careful. I shall worry if you are not back before dusk to-morrow night."

Permission to pass the night obtained, the comrades quickly collected their rifles and some fishing tackle, mounted the ponies Ned had brought up and rode away.

After learning from their companion that he had found Pete and the herd at the pool when he arrived, the lads indulged in speculation as to when and where the pursuers would come across the raiders and the chances of recovering the cattle.

Of a sudden, remembering his discussion with his brother the night before, Larry asked:

"How do you stop a stampede, Ned?"

"You generally don't," replied the man with a grin.

"But you try, don't you? I'm sure I've read of cowboys stopping stampedes."

"I guess they do it easier in story books then than on the plains. The best way to stop a stampede is not to let it start. Still, if there's enough boys on hand, I suppose it could be done. The only way, though, would be to ride down the leaders and turn them round.

"As I said, if there are enough boys on hand when the trouble breaks, they can get them to milling, which is going round and round in a circle until the cattle get tired out. But it takes a mighty lively bunch of cow-punchers to do it."

After riding for two hours they came in sight of the cattle, and the two brothers quickened their pace, eager to see them at close range.

"Steady now. Don't go riding at them like a pack of Indians or you will have all the stampede you want to see," exclaimed Ned. "My, but they surely are restless!"

This last remark was caused by some of the steers which raised their heads at the approach of the riders, then turned and dashed back to the body of the herd.

"Oh, dear! I'm afraid we've started them," said Horace.

"Pull in your horses!" commanded Ned. "The

main bunch is all right. If we come up to them slow, there won't be any trouble."

Obeying instantly, the boys reined their horses to a walk and reached the pool without causing further alarm among the cattle.

"So this is where the ghosts live, is it?" asked Tom, gazing from a little knoll at a placid body of water about one hundred feet long by twice as many wide, surrounded by reeds.

"Maybe you won't laugh so much to-night," declared their friend and then, because he did not like to be joked about his belief that the place was haunted, he added: "Come on, let's see if we can find which direction father and the boys took."

The chance to try if they could track any one on the prairie appealed to the others, and they started to ride around the pool.

"I can see where they had a camp fire!" cried Tom, pointing toward a pile of white ashes.

"Here's where the grass is all tramped down. Look, there's a regular path right for the mountains."

"No, this is the way they went, to the south, here," returned Larry.

Each boy was firm in his declaration that he had found the trail and to prove it they dismounted and began to examine the ground.

"I'm right. I can see horse tracks!" cried Larry. "This is the way they took, isn't it, Ned?"

Thus appealed to, both Horace and the man rode up.

"Larry's right," announced Ned, after a few moments observation.

"Then what caused my tracks?" demanded Tom. "Here are horse tracks, too, only most of the hoofprints are made by cattle."

"Oh, you can't tell a cow from a pony print," taunted Horace.

"Come over and see for yourself," retorted Tom.

Examination proving that he was right, his friend exclaimed:

"That was made by the boys coming up."

"But the tracks are all going toward the mountains. They certainly wouldn't drive any cattle away with them. You don't—you don't suppose it's another raid, do you?" and Tom glanced at Ned.

"Yes."

CHAPTER XV

THE CONTESTED TRAIL

THE thought that the cattle thieves should have dared to make still another raid on the very night when the outfits of the Half-Moon and Three Stars ranches had set out to run them to cover was so startling that for several minutes after Tom had suggested it no one spoke.

Larry was the first one to recover from the shock of surprise.

"There's no use in trying to guess," he declared. "We must find out. The only way to do that, so far as I can see, is to follow the trail and discover where it leads."

This proposition received the excited endorsement of the other two boys, and Horace added:

"Wouldn't it be dandy if we could round up Megget and his men before father and the others? Come on!"

"Don't be in too much of a hurry," urged Tom.

"Oh, if you are afraid to go, you needn't. I'll go alone," sneered Horace.

Flushing at the taunt of cowardice, Tom bit his lips that he might not say anything he should regret.

"You ought to know, Horace, that neither Larry nor I are afraid," he responded. "I was only thinking about your mother. We promised her we would be back by to-morrow night. The idea of our going in pursuit of Megget by ourselves is foolish. The thing to do is to make sure this trail leads into the mountains and then go and try to find your father and his men."

"Now you're talking sense," interrupted Ned.

"To find them will certainly take us longer than until to-morrow night. In order that Mrs. Wilder need not worry, we must let her know of the change in our plans."

"That's so," agreed Larry. "Still there is no reason for our all going back; one is enough. Let's draw lots to see who it shall be."

"Not much," returned Horace. "So long as father and Bill are away, I am in charge of the Half-Moon. The rest of you must do as I say. Ned is the one to go back!"

"But you boys don't know anything about the trails," protested the man. "You will get lost."

"We certainly can follow this one," retorted Horace hotly. "And we can always find our way back. Just tell mother we shall join father."

In vain the driver of the grub wagon endeavored to dissuade the lads, but the thought of taking part in the pursuit of the raiders, after all, made them deaf to all his arguments, and at last Horace exclaimed impatiently:

"You are only delaying us, Ned. I say you are to return to the ranch. That settles it. Larry and Tom and I are going to take the trail." And, without further ado, he shook out his pony and headed for the mountains, the two brothers at his side.

The pace at which Horace rode was terrific, and because of the hot sun, the horses were soon covered with lather.

"Look here, we've got to go at a slower gait," announced Larry. "If we keep up this clip, our ponies will give out. They can't stand it and the heat, too. And if they do give out, it will be sure to be just at the very time we need them most."

"But we'll soon be in the mountains, and then it will be cooler," asserted Horace. "I want to overhaul the raiders before night. Won't father and the others feel small when they learn that we

three, whom they left behind because we were too young, have rounded up Megget?"

"You don't mean to say that you intend for us three to tackle the raiders alone?" exclaimed Tom.

"Why not?"

"Because we wouldn't stand one chance in a thousand—no, nor in ten thousand—of being able to capture them. We don't know the trail at all, and they probably are familiar with every rock and turn in it. If they should discover that we were pursuing them, all they would need do would be to lie in wait for us and capture us when we came along."

The truth of what the younger of the chums said was so evident that even the impetuous Horace was forced to admit it.

"Then what shall we do?" he asked. "If you have any better plan to suggest, out with it."

Tom, however, could think of nothing feasible and was silent.

The boys had pulled their ponies down to a walk and for several minutes none of them spoke.

Of a sudden Blackhawk raised his head, sniffed the air and then uttered a low whinny.

The sound, coming so unexpectedly, scared the lads, and they looked at one another in alarm.

"He smells something," exclaimed Horace in a whisper, as though fearing to speak out loud.

The boys were in the lowland between two crests of the rolling plains.

"Perhaps it's the cattle. They may be on the other side of that rise in the plains," returned Larry.

Anxiously the three boys gazed toward the crest. The thought that they might be close upon the very men they were chasing startled them, and they were at a loss as to the best thing to do.

"If it is the raiders and the cattle Blackhawk scented, then they'll be on the lookout for us," murmured Tom. "They could hear that whinny, for——"

"By jove! it is they," cried Larry excitedly. "See those horses' ears bobbing?" And he pointed to the south.

Following his finger, his companions beheld two sharp points steadily advancing from the farther side of the crest.

"Be ready to give it to 'em," breathed Horace, at the same time unslinging his rifle.

But before he could get it to his shoulder the head of the horse came into view and the next instant the head and shoulders of a man.

In a flash the chums seized their rifles.

The horseman was only about one hundred yards away, and as he caught sight of the rifles pointed toward him he pulled his pony to its haunches.

"Throw up your hands!" yelled Horace. "If you make a move, we'll drop you. You are a prisoner of the Half-Moon Ranch!"

As the horseman heard the name he shouted:

"Steady, there! I'm Jim Jeffreys. What are you up to, anyhow?"

"Who's Jim Jeffreys?" demanded Larry of Horace.

"He's one of our neighbors, if it's him."

"Well, don't you know? Can't you recognize him?"

Having recovered from his fright, the boy stared at the man who had caused it and then announced:

"Yes, it is Jim."

"It's a pity you couldn't have recognized him before!" snapped Tom as he and his brother lowered their rifles.

CHAPTER XVI

WHAT JEFFREYS KNEW

JEFFREYS, as soon as he understood his identity had been established, leaped his pony toward the boys and was soon beside them.

"You are a fine lot to be packing rifles!" he snorted, his anger rising as the danger passed. "You may think it's a good joke to cover anybody you meet on the plains, but some one may turn the joke on you by firing before you get your aim. You aren't what you call 'quick on the trigger.' "

"Which is fortunate for you—in this case," declared Larry, resenting the manner and tone of the stranger.

The sight of the two serious-faced boys, whose eyes showed them to be keen and alert, brought Jeffreys to his senses.

"I reckon you're right," he exclaimed. "But what's up, Horace? If you and your friends are out for a little excitement, just take my tip and

turn your attention to jumping a coyote or you may——"

"We are not after excitement," retorted the boy from the Half-Moon Ranch. "We don't have to go looking for it. We've got all we want. Some of Megget's gang have raided our herd."

"No? It must have been them I saw over near the hills early this morning."

"Where were they?" "Which way were they going?" "How many were there of them?" demanded the lads, each one asking a question.

"It was just after sun-up. I was too far away to recognize the cattle, but I counted four men. As they only had about fifty head with 'em, I sort of suspected something was wrong, so I got out of sight before they could see me. Leastways, if they did, they didn't make any move to get me."

"Where have you been?"

"I've been up in the hills for a few days prospecting."

"Did you find the mine?" inquired Tom, forgetting the raid and pursuit in his eagerness to learn about the Lost Lode.

"No, I didn't. I just learned another trail, which isn't the right one."

Larry, however, was more interested in the cattle thieves and brought the conversation back to them.

"Were the men near the hills when you saw them?" he asked.

"About a quarter of a mile away."

"Then come on. We must get to the hills so we can find their trail," declared Horace.

"You kids sure ain't going after 'em alone?" exclaimed Jeffreys incredulously.

"But if there are only four of them?"

"To you three, and they are men, don't forget that."

"But you'll make four," suggested Tom.

"Providing I was going with you, which I ain't, I'd like to, but I reckon I'd better ride back to my own ranch and see they haven't lifted any of my cattle. If they have, I'll get my boys and take up the trail."

Realizing from the expressions on their faces that the lads were surprised as well as disappointed at his refusal to accompany them, the horseman said:

"You all just take my advice and don't try to follow those raiders into the mountains. What you want to do is to find Wilder and Snider as quick as you can, providing you won't go back to your ranch, where you ought to be."

"Which you can bet your whole outfit we

won't!" snapped Horace. "We started on this chase and we're going to stay on it."

Jeffreys smiled at the determined manner of the young rancher.

"Then join your father as soon as you can. Don't try any fool stunt like going into the mountains. Remember, when you are on the prairie you can see on all sides of you."

"Except when you're behind a crest," chuckled Tom.

At this reference to the recent *contretemps* Jeffreys frowned, started to say something and instead dug his spurs into his pony, galloping away without even so much as looking back.

"He's a fine neighbor—not," declared Larry as the trio resumed their way. "I should have thought he would be only too glad to help your father and Mr. Snider get back their cattle."

"He isn't very keen for the Half-Moon," rejoined Horace. "Father beat him in a law case over a boundary line once and he's never forgotten it."

"And I reckon he won't forget his meeting with us to-day," said Tom, grinning.

At the memory of the reception they had given Jeffreys the comrades had a hearty laugh.

"Still, he gave us some good advice," asserted

Larry. "I agree with him that the thing for us is to find the Half-Moon and Three Stars crowd as soon as we can."

"Which seems to be a pretty big order in itself," mused Tom. "I say we go and see where they drove the cattle into the hills and then decide."

This suggestion met with no opposition, and as the boys rode toward the mountains, the wooded sides of which looked inviting because of the relief they promised from the torrid heat of the plains, they discussed various plans, only to discard them.

At last they reached the hills. Dismounting, they hobbled their ponies, removed the saddles and bridles sticky with lather, and then broke out some lunch which they ate ravenously, despite the fact that their mouths were almost parched.

Greatly refreshed by the food, the boys decided to follow the trail of the cattle till they could get some idea of its direction.

"Let's go on foot," suggested Tom. "The ponies will be all right, the rest will do them good, and we can get through the brush and over the rocks with less noise."

Readily his companions agreed, and picking up their rifles, they quickly found the tracks made by the cattle.

For some distance the trail seemed more like an

abandoned wood road than anything else. But gradually it began to grow narrower and at last became no more than a path winding in and out among the rocks.

Several times some sound caused the boys to raise their guns to their shoulders and peer about in all directions, but nothing could they see save the trees and rocks, and they ascribed the noises to some denizen of the forest roaming about.

Of a sudden Tom, who was in the lead, stopped.

"I smell something awful queer," he whispered.

The trail wound along the edge of a sharp descent and just ahead was an abrupt turn.

Ere either Larry or Horace could reply to their companion's announcement all three were dumbfounded to see a big, shaggy brown head appear round the turn in the trail.

"It's a bear!" gasped Horace.

At the sight of the three boys the big head had paused in surprise. Then its lips began to curl, disclosing a wicked looking set of teeth, and finally it broke into a savage snarl, at the same time rising in the air.

"He's getting to his hind legs. That means fight!" breathed Horace. "Come on, let's run!"

"But he'd overtake us and beat us down with his paws," returned Larry. "We've got to kill him."

Less time did the action consume than is required to describe it, and the boys were standing terror stricken when the bear charged upon them, making vicious lunges at them with his huge paws.

Roused from his fright by the imminence of his peril, Tom raised his rifle, only to have it knocked from his hands by a swing of one of the bear's paws.

"Drop down! drop down so I can shoot!" yelled Larry as he saw the desperate situation in which his brother was placed.

Instantly Tom obeyed, throwing himself to one side as he fell.

But as the younger of the brothers dropped the bear, as though singling him out for his particular antagonist, also dropped to all fours, and Larry's shot went over him.

Horace, however, shot lower, and a terrible roar told them that the bullet had struck home.

In the fury of his pain the bear seemed to think that the boy lying flat on the rocks was the cause of his suffering, and, with mouth distended, charged upon him.

In a frenzy lest they might not be able to save Tom, Larry and Horace both fired.

At the impact of the bullets the bear rose on

THE RIFLE WAS KNOCKED FROM HIS HAND.

Page 148.

his hind legs, swung wildly with his paws at the steel barrels that were pouring the terribly painful things into him and fell prone, the huge carcass missing Tom by less than a foot.

CHAPTER XVII

LOST!

FROM the moment when his brother had cried to him to drop, Tom had kept his eyes on the bear, and when he saw the beast plunge forward and realized that it was dead, he leaped to his feet, his pale face telling of the awful strain under which he had been.

The reaction from their excitement made Larry and Horace tremble and, for the time, they could only look from their companion to the carcass of the bear, too unnerved to speak.

Tom was the first to recover from the fright, and he thanked the others for what they had done.

"Let's not talk about it," interposed Larry. "The thing for us to do is to get out of here lively. The reverberations from those shots are echoing yet. The raiders must have heard them, and they'll know some one is on their trail, so they will either come back to see who it is or else hide to waylay us."

Tom and Horace were perfectly willing to give up following the trail farther, and all three were retracing their steps when the elder of the chums cried:

"The rifle! Tom, you forgot to pick up your rifle."

"Which shows I was some scared," and he smiled apologetically.

"But it's a worse one on Larry and me," protested Horace. "There's some excuse for you. But the bear wasn't charging us."

"Oh, well there's no harm done," returned Larry, pleased at the spirit Horace's words showed. "We can go back and get it. It's a mighty good thing, though, that we thought of it before we reached the ponies. From the looks of the sky and the shadows it won't be long before dusk, and Mr. Wilder told us night comes quickly in the mountains."

Ere Larry had finished speaking they had started back to the scene of their encounter.

Yet when they reached the spot Tom's rifle was nowhere to be seen.

In dismay the boys looked at one another. Already the mountains were turning purple-black in the twilight, the shadows transforming the trees and rocks into weird figures.

"Perhaps it's under the bear," hazarded Horace, his low voice evidencing the awe which the silence and the surroundings inspired in him.

"Then give a hand while we move him," commanded Larry. "It won't do to stay here long or we may lose our way as well as the rifle."

Little relishing the thought of wandering through the woods in the dark, the boys seized one of the paws and pulled with all their might.

But, to their surprise, they could move the carcass scarcely at all.

"My, but he's a monster!" gasped Larry. "It's only a waste of valuable time to try to lift him or even move him. The only thing we can do is to try to feel under him with our hands."

Dropping to their knees, the lads thrust their arms under the shaggy fur, being able to reach far enough to make sure that the much-wanted rifle was not beneath the body of the bear.

"Bet he knocked it over the cliff," declared Horace. "From which side did he strike it, Tom?"

"More than I know. All I could see was paws. The air was full of them and they seemed to come from all directions at once."

This explanation brought laughter to Larry and Horace, which ceased abruptly, however, as from somewhere on the mountains there suddenly rang

out a low wail, more like the howl of a coyote than anything else, yet with a certain difference that even the chums were able to distinguish.

"Whatever that is, I don't care to meet it," exclaimed Horace. "Let's go back. We've still got two rifles. If we stick to the plains till we join father we can get along all right."

"Suppose we don't meet your father, what then?" returned Larry.

"Always looking for more trouble, as if we didn't have enough already," chided Tom. "Of course we'll meet him. Anyhow, this is no place to argue about it. If you and Horace can't protect me, I'll take both your rifles and watch over the two of you."

There was a suggestion of mockery in Tom's voice, but taking it good naturedly, Larry replied:

"Oh, no you won't. You can't throw your gun away every time you get scared and then take ours from us. You just get in between Horace and me. Horace, you lead because you know how to follow a trail better, and I'll keep off the bears and raiders," he added with a smile.

The movements of the boys, however, were more rapid than their words, and they were traveling the trail once more ere Larry's joking allusion

to the loss of the rifle and the protection he would afford.

So long as their way lay among the rocks they followed the trail with little difficulty, but when they entered the woods their troubles began in earnest.

None too self-possessed in the dark, even when going about the ranch, when he entered the inky darkness caused by the maze of boughs and foliage, Horace lost his head completely, and it did not take the comrades long to realize they had wandered from the trail.

"Better let me take the lead, Horace; I'm taller," said Larry, at the same time giving his brother a poke in the ribs as a warning not to object.

"Well, you'll have to be a giraffe to see your way over the tops of these trees," chuckled Tom.

Their plight was too serious to admit of jest, however, and after wandering for half an hour, stumbling over dead limbs and running into trees and branches, they halted in despair.

"I remember Si told us back home that when a man's lost he generally travels in a circle," said Tom.

"So he did, and he said it was usually to the left,

because a man takes a longer step with his right foot," added Larry.

"That may help when you know which is the right and which is the left of the way you have been going, but here we've turned round to talk, so we don't even know that much," interposed Horace.

"That's a fact," admitted the elder of the chums reluctantly as he realized that by facing one another they had lost all sense of direction. "It's a good thing you thought of it, Horace, or we might have got ourselves into a worse mess than we're in now."

"If it weren't for all that good food cooked by Hop Joy back with the horses and the fact that I'm hungry, I'd be in favor of staying right where we are till morning," announced Tom.

"I reckon that is the best thing we can do, anyhow," declared his brother.

"Not with my appetite," retorted Tom.

"This is no time to be funny," reprimanded Larry. "If we keep on moving, we may never get out, while if we stay here we can climb into one of these trees and be safe till daylight shows us——"

"By jove! That's the very thing!" exclaimed the younger of the chums, and there was such a

tone of genuine enthusiasm in his voice that the others asked excitedly:

"What?"

"Why, the trees. We won't need to sleep in them. By climbing a tall one, we can get the lay of the land as soon as moonlight comes, which will show us at least how to get out onto the plains again."

"Hooray!" cried Larry and Horace together.

Each realized the plan was feasible, provided the night was not cloudy, and once on the prairie it would not be difficult for the young rancher to lead the way to the horses. And, although they knew that the moon would not rise for two hours at least, they were so eager to try the plan that they began to discuss who should be the one to do the climbing.

The two brothers claimed preference because they were both stronger and taller than their companion, but Horace silenced them by declaring that not only could he go higher because he was lighter, but that he would be able to recognize their whereabouts from his knowledge of the mountains.

Restraining their impatience as best they could, the boys sat down.

"When we do get out, which way shall we go to join Mr. Wilder and the others?" asked Larry.

This question started further discussion. One suggestion after another was made only to be rejected because of some obstacle, and finally they decided the safest thing to do would be to ride till they found the trail over which the cattle had been driven from the bottoms and follow that.

Soon Horace climbed a convenient tree.

"We sure are dubs!" he cried.

"Why? Is the moon up?" asked the two chums eagerly.

"No, the moon isn't up. I don't need it. The stars are bright enough. We've been sitting here fretting all this while within a hundred yards of the prairie!"

CHAPTER XVIII

A MYSTERIOUS CALL

HORACE and Larry having picked up their rifles, the three boys resumed their way, Larry leading slowly, taking care to make his steps of as nearly equal length as possible, and in due time they came onto the prairie.

"My, but this stretch of level does look good," declared Tom, and his companions expressed their hearty agreement as they hastened toward the spot where they left their ponies.

Finding them without difficulty, the lads broke out the food and ate ravenously.

"Hey, go easy on the grub," cautioned Larry as he noted the amount his companions were eating. "This is all we have to last us until we meet the others—or get back to the ranch," he added as the thought recurred to him that luck would play a large part in the success of their search for the pursuing party.

"You can go easy if you like. So long as there's anything to eat, I am going to eat," returned his brother. "Don't worry. We won't starve. If worse comes to worse, I can get you some deer meat, provided you'll lend me your rifle."

"Or I can get you some mountain lion meat," added Horace.

"I notice neither of you mention bear meat," chuckled the elder of the chums.

"Because it doesn't agree with us," returned Tom, and at this allusion to their recent adventure they all laughed merrily.

In delight at the extrication from their dilemma the boys chatted and joked as they repacked the saddle bags, unhobbled their ponies and prepared to resume riding.

"There's only one thing that could add to my happiness," remarked Larry as he swung onto Lightning's back.

"What's that?" inquired his companions.

"About a gallon of drinking water."

"I'm some thirsty, too," said Horace, "but I don't know of a place where there is any water."

"Then we'll leave it to the horses," asserted Tom. "Mr. Wilder told me they would always locate water if there was any about. From the way Blackhawk acts, I think he scents some."

"Scents water!" sneered Horace.

"Just you wait and see," retorted the younger of the comrades, and giving free rein to his pony, he let him nose along through the grass for some distance when the animal turned abruptly and entered the woods, stopping beside a brook.

"You'd better appoint me guide and captain of this company," smiled the boy as they dismounted and drank greedily of the cool water.

"You'd be a fine captain without a gun," retorted Larry, and in high spirits they remounted.

For a time the boys had the moon for company, but toward midnight clouds gathered in the sky and a chilly wind began to blow.

"How about pitching camp pretty soon?" suggested Larry.

"Wait till we get to Elkhorn River," answered Horace.

"How far is that? I didn't suppose there was such a thing in these plains."

"Oh, I should say it was fifteen miles from here," returned the young rancher. "It isn't much of a river, but it's better than none."

"Wouldn't ride fifteen— Hello! What's that glow in the sky right next the mountains?" exclaimed Tom, pointing to where a faint glare was visible against the dark background of trees.

"It's a fire," asserted Horace, "a camp fire. You can tell by the steadiness of the light."

Excitedly they speculated as to whose it could be.

"If it's raiders, we want to know it. Perhaps we can round up some of them," declared Horace.

And urging their ponies into a gallop, the boys rode forward.

When they were near enough to distinguish the flames they dismounted, hobbled their horses in the underbrush and approached on foot.

No sign of man or beast could they see, and their curiosity was further aroused.

"Stoop down so your heads are in the grass," admonished Horace. "It may be they have seen us and are hiding among the trees. Don't make any noise and stick close together."

Crouching low, the trio advanced stealthily. Nearer and nearer they drew, yet no sound could they hear. Consumed with curiosity, Horace suddenly stood up, determined to learn if any one were sleeping beside the fire.

Yet no sooner had he risen than a command rang out:

"Throw up your hands!"

The two brothers, ignorant of their companion's action, gasped at the words. But Horace let out a whoop of joy.

"Hooray! It's father and the boys," he cried so loud that instantly a dozen figures bounded from about the fire.

"Well, if it ain't them kids!" ejaculated Pete, who had been on guard. "It's lucky you recognized my voice, Horace."

By this time Tom and Larry had straightened up and all three were hastening toward the camp fire, thinking only of their good fortune in finding their friends.

"Horace, what does this mean?" demanded his father sternly. "I told you to stay at home, and yet we haven't been gone but twenty-four hours and you come tagging along."

But the severity of his father did not dismay the young rancher. Looking straight at him, the boy hastily told of the ride to the pool and the discovery that more cattle had been driven away.

The information excited the cowboys greatly, and emphatic were their opinions of the daring of the thieves in making another raid and within a few hours after the men pursuing them had set out.

"They probably were watching us all the time," asserted the owner of the Three Stars.

"Probably," agreed Mr. Wilder. "But what have you boys been doing since you learned of the

raid? You could almost walk your ponies from the pool to here in all this time.

Before any of them could reply, however, a long, low wail rang out. Surprised, the men glanced at one another.

"That sounds like a coyote, but it ain't," asserted Pete.

Again the cry broke on the air and was repeated twice.

"Why, it's the very same sound we heard in the mountains!" exclaimed Larry. And his companions confirmed him.

"The same cry you heard in the mountains?" repeated Mr. Wilder.

"Yes, sir," and in a few words the elder of the brothers related their adventures.

"Then it's a signal," declared Pete. "You boys have been followed. It's a mighty good thing we were camping here."

"Those cries came from the plains. Mebbe it's the thieves going for more cattle," declared Sandy.

"We'll find out what it is. Everybody to horse!" commanded Mr. Wilder. "Pete, three or four of you go with Horace and the Aldens to get their ponies. We'll ride up and join you."

CHAPTER XIX

A TERRIBLE PLOT

QUICKLY the men ran to the woods where they had concealed their ponies, unhobbled, saddled and mounted them, riding along till they came to where Pete and the boys were.

"Which way shall we go?" inquired Sandy when all were in their saddles. "That cry came from straight ahead of us on the plains, according to my judgment."

Pete and the other cowboys agreed with him, and, trusting to their sense of direction, the owner of the Half-Moon said:

"Then we'll ride due east. Spread out abreast. The more ground we can cover the better."

"But don't get too far apart," interposed the rancher from the Three Stars. "Keep close enough together so you can see the man on your right."

Rapidly were these commands given, and within fifteen minutes after the mysterious calls had

startled them the twenty-three horsemen were advancing over the prairie, eyes and ears alert for sound or sight of the men who had uttered the signals, the two Eastern boys and Horace riding between Mr. Wilder and Pete at the southern end of the line.

But for once Sandy's ears had played him false. Ignorant of the psychological fact that only when a man's head is turned can he correctly judge the direction of sound, it being impossible to distinguish between a sound coming from directly in front or behind, the foreman of the Three Stars Ranch had been deceived because he had been looking straight ahead out into the prairie. And instead of riding toward the men who had roused them by their cries, each bound of the horses was carrying them farther away.

When Larry and his companions had met the bear, the four raiders with the cattle Jeffreys had seen were only about two miles in advance of them. As the boys had thought, the reverberations of the shots had reached the ears of the men at the rear of the cattle and they had uttered the wail as a signal to those ahead, jumping to the conclusion that they were being followed.

Making use of their knowledge of the mountains, the raiders had hurriedly driven the cattle

into the forest, where they would be out of sight and so could not give warning of the whereabouts of the thieves, and had then hidden themselves behind some rocks along the trail. From their ambuscade they would be able to shoot down their pursuers or capture them as they felt inclined.

But as the reader knows, the boys doubled on their trail and so divided the trap.

After waiting till dark without any sign of pursuers, the raiders grew fearsome.

"We've got to find out for sure whether it's somebody on our trail or just some one that is hunting," declared one of them, who, if the two brothers could have seen him, they would have recognized as Gus Megget.

"Considering we've waited more than two hours and no one has showed up, I say we ought to push onto the Lode, Gus," asserted another.

"How can we drive cattle over this trail in the dark?" growled the chief of the raiders. "You ought to have more sense , seeing the trouble we've had to get them as far as this in the daylight."

"So long as we can't drive, we might just as well go back and find out who's been shooting."

Realizing that it was futile to urge their leader to change his mind, the other raiders sullenly acquiesced, and, emerging from their places of con-

cealment, went into the woods to get their horses and were soon riding stealthily back over the trail.

Though they dared not refuse to go, the men, however, were not backward in expressing their disapproval of the move, declaring that they were tempting disaster by returning when they had made so successful a start.

But Megget paid no attention to their grumblings and soon his companions lapsed into silence.

Fate, however, which had saved the two brothers and the young rancher from stumbling into the ambush, was still favoring them.

For when the raiders reached the edge of the prairie Megget ordered a halt that they might eat, and when again they resumed their ride the boys were far on their way toward the spot where they met their friends.

Not long did it take their pursuers to discover the place where the three had eaten and then to find the direction in which they had departed.

"What's the use of following any farther, Gus?" demanded one of them. "So long as they have ridden to the south, and there are only three of them, anyhow, we are in no danger."

But with a blind obstinacy the leader of the cattle thieves persisted in continuing the pursuit, and set the pace at a fast gallop.

In due course of time, as the boys before them, they discovered the glare from the camp fire.

"We'll ride into the mountains, dismount and then find out who it is that has the fire," declared Megget.

"You're playing with trouble, Gus," protested his companions. "From what I know of Wilder, he won't let a bunch of his cattle be lifted without doing something. That may be his fire."

"All the more reason why we should go to it—to make sure," snapped the leader of the raiders. "Wilder is a fool or he wouldn't leave his herd unguarded at the Witches' Pool."

"You'll find he's smarter than you think. I'll bet all my share of these raids will come to that the only reason the herd was alone was because his whole outfit is on the trail from the bottoms," asserted another.

"Well, the boys can take care of 'em if they are. I said I was going to find out who built that fire, and I'm going to." And without more ado, the leader of the raiders dashed into the woods.

Riding cautiously among the trees until he thought he was about back of the fire Megget gave the word to dismount.

A short distance to the south and above them was a ledge from which they would be able to com-

mand a view of the camp fire, and rapidly the raiders made their way to it.

What they saw when they reached the top and gazed down caused them to exclaim in amazement.

The cowboys were saddling their ponies, and instead of the three men they had expected to discover, Megget and his companions saw a dozen.

"That's the Half-Moon bunch!" declared one of them.

"There are too many of them," asserted another. "We're in a pretty mess now. Those three men we followed have evidently informed them of finding our trail and they are starting to pick it up."

"Don't you worry about that," growled Megget. And before his companions were aware what he intended to do, he uttered the calls that caused the ranch owners and cowboys to start out into the prairie.

Eagerly the raiders watched them disappear and Megget chuckled:

"I thought I could fool 'em. It's easy when you are above any one." And then he added: "You'll wish you had never started after me, Wilder!"

Wondering at their leader's meaning, his fellows had no chance to ask, however, for even as he spoke Megget was descending from the ledge.

Arriving at the camp fire, he glanced about for a few moments, then sent his men for the horses.

As soon as he was sure he was alone, the leader of the raiders walked out on the plains, paused, wet his finger in his mouth, then raised his hand above his head.

"Great! I'm sure playing in luck," he muttered to himself. "The wind is blowing from the west—straight out across the plains." And chuckling grimly, the cattle thief returned to the fire to await the horses.

Mounting quickly when they arrived, Megget gave a curt order for his own men to follow and galloped in the same direction the ranch owners and cowboys had taken.

At the end of a quarter of a mile he drew rein and again went through the performance of wetting his finger and raising it above his head, murmuring more to himself than his pals:

"I didn't know but that the hills might have changed the direction of the wind.

"Here, you," he added, turning to his men, "two of you ride a mile up and Squinty and I'll ride south. When I give the call, fire the grass and then ride for the trail and drive the cattle to the mine. I'll cut across and warn Vasquez and the others."

CHAPTER XX

THE PRAIRIE FIRE

As his men heard the words and realized their significance, they glanced at their leader and then at one another.

Yet none of them moved.

"Are you deaf?" roared Megget. "Do as I say—and lively. Squinty, come with me." And clapping spurs to his pony, he dashed southward.

Fearing to disobey, the two raiders delegated to ride to the north started. But as soon as they were out of earshot one of them said:

"Megget can fire the prairie if he wants to, I won't. I'm none too stuck on cattle raiding, anyhow, but when it comes to starting a fire that will probably wipe out the Half-Moon outfit and perhaps even the herd, Bobby Lawrence balks!"

"Showing the white feather, eh?" snarled his companion. "I warned Gus you wasn't any good, but he wouldn't believe me. You'll do what he says, though, as long as you're with Red Ike!"

Red Ike was a giant in strength, the bully of the gang, and Lawrence had seen too much of him to care to risk an encounter with him, so with a growl he said:

"All right. Lead the way."

"Not much. I'll ride beside you, so you won't come any tricks."

But though Lawrence had appeared to yield, it was only as a matter of policy, and his determination not to fire the prairie was as firm as before. Yet how he could prevent it, he was at a loss to determine until suddenly he remembered that Red Ike had asked him for a match that afternoon.

As the thought flashed through his mind that his companion had no means for carrying out Megget's instructions Lawrence put his hand to his belt, where he carried his tobacco outfit, and quickly unloosening it, let it fall into the grass.

None too soon was his action, for even as he opened his hand to let go of the pouch that held his pipe, tobacco and cigarette papers Red Ike snapped:

"I reckon we've gone a mile." And as he turned to look back the signal sounded, and in a trice he saw the flames, set by his leader, leap in the air.

"Quick, Gus has touched off!" he cried, then

added as he felt in vain for any matches, "Gimme some of your fire-sticks, mine are all gone."

Suppressing the smile that came to his face at the words, for Lawrence had feared his companion might have obtained a supply from one of the others, he replied:

"Can't. I haven't any."

"What?" roared Red Ike. "You can't come any such game on me. You had plenty this afternoon. Hand 'em over—and be lively!"

As he spoke the bully edged his pony closer to the other.

Lawrence, however, only repeated his statement calmly.

"You won't gimme them, eh? Then I'll take 'em myself." And like a flash his powerful fist shot out, striking his companion under the right side of his jaw with such terrific force that it lifted him from the saddle.

Springing to the ground, Red Ike roughly searched the motionless body, and when he found that the tobacco pouch was indeed gone he realized the trick that Lawrence had played.

For a moment the baffled raider glowered upon the man who had outwitted him. Then his attention was distracted by the sound of hoof beats and, turning, he beheld the two horses racing toward the

hills, having taken fright at the flames leaping over the plains. And never thinking of the man he had unhorsed, Red Ike dashed after them.

Advancing cautiously, the ranch owners and their men were beginning to wonder if they could have mistaken the direction of the signals when they heard the call again.

"That's back of us," declared Pete.

Instantly the others turned in their saddles, and as they did so the flames bounded into the air.

"They fooled us good and plenty!" growled Nails, while all the boys glared at the foreman of the Three Stars Ranch.

"They did," asserted Mr. Wilder grimly, "but it's no use talking about it now. We've got all we can do to get away from the fire."

In terror the boy chums watched the flames spread as if by magic till in a few minutes a towering wall of fire was racing toward them.

"Shall we start a back fire?" asked Bill.

"No use," returned several of the cowboys, "the wind's in the wrong direction."

"Then we've got to ride for it," asserted Snider.

Well did the cowboys realize the danger, and with might and main they urged their ponies, each one bent only on saving himself.

For a time the two brothers and Horace kept

THE PRAIRIE FIRE.

Page 174.

pace with them, but they were not skilled in the fine art of getting the most out of their ponies when the animals began to tire, and it was not long before they found themselves dropping behind.

"Wait for us!" shouted Horace as he noticed the distance that separated them constantly increasing.

For a moment it seemed to the terrified lads that their cry had not been heard, yet just when they began to despair three horses dropped behind, and as the boys came up with them they recognized the two ranch owners and Pete.

"Take Horace, Pete; Snider, Tom; I'll take Larry," commanded Mr. Wilder, and each of the men leaped their horses to seize the bridle of the boy indicated.

Not more than two miles behind them was the terrible wall of fire. In front of it coyotes and all other animals of the plains were in full flight, their cries of fear or pain as they fell victims to the all-devouring flames now and then rising above the sullen roar.

"Oh, it's gaining! it's gaining!" wailed Horace.

"Don't look behind. Keep your eyes in front and *ride!*" commanded his father.

Sparks borne by the wind began to fall all about, now and then starting blazes which the cowboys put out by beating with their blankets where they

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could, yet none checked his speed. To the hot air was added smoke, and men and horses were breathing with difficulty, gasping and coughing.

"If you've got handkerchiefs, jam them in your mouths!" cried Snider.

Nearer, ever nearer drew the wall of flame. It seemed to the chums that they must be breathing fire, so did the air burn their mouths.

Time and again they swayed in their saddles and would have fallen had it not been for the men beside them, who had let go the bridles to steady the boys, at the same time rowelling their own mounts.

Just when it seemed to the boys that the shirts on their backs would burst into flames a shout went up from in front:

"The river! The river!"

"One more spurt, everybody!"

Gamely men, boys and horses responded.

"Right over the bank! Don't stop!" bellowed Pete.

Ignorant of the height, caring little, eager only to gain the water, the boys felt their horses leap through the air and the next minute were sputtering and gasping as they sank below the surface of the river.

CHAPTER XXI

A RIDE FOR LIFE

QUICKLY the horses swam for the shore, and as the Elkhorn was only deep for a few rods, it was not many minutes before the cowboys were shaking and removing their wet garments. But the boys were oblivious of their condition.

In open-mouthed wonder they stared at the spectacle presented by the flames from whose devouring fury they had so narrowly escaped.

The wall of fire had in reality been farther away than it had seemed. For several minutes it advanced, the tongues of flames towering in the air. A moment the livid wall paused as it reached the brink of the river, while jets of fire reached out as though striving to clutch the men who had escaped. Then seemingly bent on overtaking them, the flames leaped over the edge, devouring the brush and grass to the water's edge, where, loath to admit defeat, the flames flickered uncertainly and then

died away, leaving nothing but a pall of smoke to mark their course of destruction.

"They came mighty near getting us that time," exclaimed Pete, looking back over the still glowing plains.

"Too near," assented Mr. Wilder. "But Megget's men will suffer for this trick, never fear."

"They'll sure be surprised when they see us," chimed in the owner of the Three Stars.

"That's just it," returned Mr. Wilder. "Of course, they think we have perished in the flames, and when they see us riding in on them they will be so scared it will take all the fight out of them."

None the worse for their experience, the cowboys were eager to be under way again that they might exact satisfaction upon the raiders for their unwilling flight. But Mr. Wilder curbed their impatience by saying:

"It's all right to want to get on the trail again, but if we should start now, while the plains are still hot, we run the risk of crippling some of our ponies. We'll eat breakfast here and then in an hour I guess we can start. What do you think, Jim?"

"It will be all right to take grub and we can tell about the ground when we've eaten."

Fate, however, was still on the side of the ranch-

ers, for while they were at their meal it began to rain.

With a shout the cowboys greeted the first drops, but their masters grew serious.

"This rain will make it mighty hard to pick up the trail," observed the owner of the Three Stars.

"But we won't need to search for it," interposed Tom.

At his words all eyes were turned upon him, and Mr. Wilder voiced their sentiments by asking:

"Why?"

"Because I know the very place where Horace and Larry and I rode into the mountains. I thought I might want to remember it, so I broke off some branches and cut a half moon in one of the trees with my jackknife."

"That's all right, but why should we follow that trail?" demanded Bill. "The men who set the fire were all of—how far, Horace, from Tom's trail?" and he looked at his brother.

"A good twenty miles."

"Why should we ride twenty miles when we can start right in at the hills back where the fire started?" continued Bill.

Some of the cowboys laughed at this seeming evidence of Tom's lack of understanding of the

situation, but the younger of the chums had his good reasons, as he quickly proved by replying:

"Because that is where they drove fifty cattle in. Mr. Jeffreys said it was a short cut. Besides, it stands to reason the men wouldn't have gone that way unless the trail led to the mine where they could join the rest of the gang. I may be from the East," and he glanced at the boys who had laughed at him, "but I'm not so much of a tenderfoot as not to know four men aren't going on a pleasure trip with a herd of fifty steers."

"I reckon the kid is right," said the owner of the Half-Moon after the merriment this jibe evoked had subsided. "Even if the 'rustlers' didn't know we had started when they lifted the cattle from the pool, they'd know something was up when all the boys were away and that we could follow the trail to the mountains. Consequently, they being only four, would take the shortest route to join the main body."

"That argument would have been all right before the fire, Jim, but things are different now," rejoined Bill.

"Certain. But the difference is the raiders will take more time in driving the cattle in the thought that there's no one to pursue 'em till the fact of the prairie fire reaches Tolopah."

"And then that bow-legged sheriff will set out," grunted Skinny. "He couldn't catch a prairie dog. There's only one man I'd like to see on the job besides the bunch we've got here."

"Name him," cried several of the cowboys.

"Shorty Jenks."

"Why, that's our friend!" exclaimed Tom and Larry.

"I don't know about his being a friend of yours, but there's nothing on two or four legs he's afraid of. And he's great on tricks. He'd think up a scheme in no time to land Megget."

"I think Tom's idea is the right one," said Mr. Wilder. "By riding that trail we can reach the Lost Lode probably in a few hours, while it might take days to find where the gang that set fire rode into the hills. This rain has cooled off the ground, so we can start right away."

No direct command to pack the food and saddle up did the cowboys need and as day dawned they again entered the Elkhorn River.

Tom had been provided with an extra rifle Mr. Wilder had been carrying and great care did he and the other lads take to keep their arms and ammunition from getting wet a second time.

Arrived at the top of the bank from which they had leaped to safety, the party beheld a long stretch

of blackened ground. As far as they could see, it stretched away to the north and in width it was about four miles.

"Why didn't it burn everything, instead of cutting a sort of path?" asked Larry after a survey of the scene.

"That's one of the things you can't explain," replied the owner of the Three Stars. "It just don't, that's all. Of course, the wind has to be right—that is, stay in the same direction as when the fire was started. And when it does you can count on the fire's following pretty close to its lines. You see this one was set in a sort of semi-circle, with the ends burning toward one another. If you want a fire to spread, start it fan-shaped."

"There's one way the fire helped us," said Horace. "We can travel faster than we could through the grass, and it doesn't tire the horses so."

"Just another proof it's an ill wind that doesn't do somebody good," quoted Mr. Wilder, smiling.

"Maybe, but I'd rather go without the wind than have another experience like last night's," returned the owner of the Three Stars.

CHAPTER XXII

LAWRENCE'S PLAN

REALIZING that they would be able to advance but slowly along the trail, giving their ponies a chance to rest, the men were riding a stiff lope.

At first Mr. Wilder had insisted that the three youngest boys return to the ranch as soon as Tom had showed them the trail, but they had pleaded so hard, asserting they were entitled to accompany the pursuers because of their discovery of the trail, that he had finally consented, making the condition, however, that when they entered the hills the boys must ride next the rear, where in case of attack, they would not be in the brunt of it.

Larry was following the edge of grass as they drew near the place where the fire had been started. As his eyes roved over the billowy plains, they suddenly were attracted by a peculiar furrow that seemed to run through the grass like a channel.

For the moment he was tempted to call the at-

tention of the others to it, and then, fearing their ridicule, decided to find out what it was first.

Accordingly he reined his pony to one side and was approaching the furrow when he was startled to hear a cry of delight:

"I've got it! I've got it!"

Hastily unslinging his rifle, the elder of the chums pointed it in the direction whence the unexpected voice had come and shouted:

"You there, in the grass! Stand up before I count five or I'll——"

But Larry had no occasion to complete his command.

Unconscious that there was another soul within miles of him, the person addressed raised his head cautiously to see who had accosted him.

"Stand up straight, I said!" ordered the boy.

As the fellow obeyed, Mr. Wilder, Pete and the others, who had been almost as surprised at hearing Larry's words as the prisoner himself, dashed up, quickly followed by the cowboys.

Intuitively each man felt they had captured one of the raiders, and without waiting for instructions, closed in on him in a circle, completely cutting off any chance for escape.

"Who are you and what are you doing, sneaking along in the grass?" demanded Mr. Wilder sternly.

"I'm Bobby Lawrence, and I was hunting for my tobacco pouch," returned the fellow, undaunted by the angry faces gazing at him.

"That's the name of one of Megget's right-hand men," declared Nails. "I found that out at Tolopah."

With no gentle hands half a dozen of the cowboys searched Lawrence, taking from him his pistols and a long knife.

When their prisoner was harmless Mr. Wilder resumed his questions.

"Who set the fire last night?"

"If I play fair with you, will you treat me square?" demanded Lawrence.

"That depends," temporized the ranch owner. "You belong to the gang that has been raiding my herds and last night tried to destroy us by fire. You can't expect much leniency from us under the circumstances. Still, if you give us any assistance in rounding up Megget, we'll not forget it."

"Well, I'll do all I can, honest I will, Mr. Wilder."

"Don't trust him, Wilder," interposed the owner of the Three Stars. "When a man is so willing to turn on his pals, there's something wrong."

"See here, Jim Snider, you keep out of this. I'm talking to Mr. Wilder, not to you. He's square.

If it was only you, all your ponies couldn't drag a word out of me!" snapped Lawrence.

This retort angered the owner of the Three Stars, but before he could say anything the proprietor of the Half-Moon exclaimed:

"If you can give me any reason why I should believe you, Lawrence, do so."

"That's easy," returned the captive, and without wasting words, he related the incidents of the pursuit of the three boys, Megget's signals, the order to set the fire and his own action that alone had saved the herd at the pool from destruction.

In silence, now looking at one another in amazement and then at the speaker, the cowboys listened.

"That's a likely story, throwing your tobacco away," sneered Snider.

"I believe it," announced Larry calmly. "The only way I knew it was a man I'd discovered was because I heard him say twice 'I've found it.' "

This confirmation of his words from the very one who had captured him gave Lawrence heart, and quick to see the advantage it gave him, he pressed it, saying:

"There, you see, I'm telling you straight. And everything else I've said is just as true."

"Why didn't you strike for the hills when you recovered your senses?" asked Mr. Wilder. "You

would have been safe there, both from Megget and from us."

"Because I wanted my tobacco."

Whatever doubt was in the mind of the Half-Moon owner as to whether or not Lawrence had been telling the truth was dispelled by this answer.

Indeed even the owner of the Three Stars was convinced by the answer, and after a whispered consultation with Mr. Wilder, the latter announced:

"I have this proposition to make you, Lawrence. Your act in refusing to obey Megget, which beyond doubt has saved my cattle at the pool, shows you are not thoroughly bad. Therefore, if you will lead us by the shortest trail to the headquarters at the Lost Lode and help us round up Megget and his gang, I will give you a job on my ranch."

For a moment Lawrence gazed at the ranchman as though unable to believe his ears, but the kindly light in Mr. Wilder's eyes reassured him and he replied:

"Will I? Say, Bobby Lawrence knows a white man when he meets one. Give me a horse and I'll have you at the Lost Lode before dark to-night!"

CHAPTER XXIII

IN THE MOUNTAINS

OPENLY the owner of the Three Stars objected to the proposition of providing the erstwhile raider with a pony.

"If we're going to trust Lawrence to lead us to the mine, we can certainly trust him with a horse," declared Mr. Wilder. "Horace, climb up behind Tom and let Lawrence have your mount."

Quickly the change was made, and again the party advanced.

"To think we were within two miles of meeting Megget again," exclaimed Tom as they rode along. "I'm afraid we would not have got away from him so well this time."

As he heard the remark, Lawrence turned and looked the boy over from head to foot, finally saying with a smile:

"So you are the lad Gus ran foul of up in Oklahoma?"

"Yes, but my brother was with me."

"Which is he?"

"The one who found you."

At this information Lawrence threw back his head and laughed heartily. "My, but that is a good one," he ejaculated when he had recovered from his merriment. "You tenderfeet make a monkey of Gus and then capture one of his men. I'll let Gus know it was you who found me, if I never speak again. It will make him more angry than anything else could."

To their surprise, the ranchers learned that the Lost Lode was only about five miles from the plains and that it was at the foot of one of the mountains, instead of high up in them, with a splendid valley where the cattle could graze close beside it.

"Why, I've ridden through that place at least twice," asserted Pete as he recognized Lawrence's description of the spot, "but never a sign of cattle or mine have I seen."

"You noticed there was heavy woods on both sides, didn't you?" returned the former raider, smiling.

"Yes."

"Well, that explains why you didn't learn anything, though of course it might be that no cattle were in the valley when you struck it."

This explanation only served to arouse the curiosity of the hearers the more.

"The woods are the thing," he continued. "Every time any one comes along, we drive the cattle into them and no one would think to look for the entrance to a mine among the trees."

"But how does it happen you have never been taken by surprise?" queried Mr. Wilder.

"Because when we had steers in the valley we always kept a lookout. There's a cliff just above the mine from which a man can see the trail for at least two miles."

"Then won't some one discover us?" asked Bill.

"Not if we hurry. Every man jack of Megget's gang is out on this raid. All we need to do is to get there first."

"How about that fellow who was with you?" Bill inquired. "Won't he be on the lookout?"

"Who, Red Ike? Not much. He'll be too anxious to tell Gus about me. He knows his chief was going to cut across to join Vasquez and the others, and he'll follow. They'll be so tickled at the thought you all were lost in the fire they won't hurry much. Still, if we're going to round them up, we must get there before dark to-night. There's a spot just before you enter the valley where we can lie in wait and get them all."

"No, that won't do," declared Mr. Wilder. "I want to capture them without resorting to firearms, if possible. While, of course, if it should be necessary, I would sanction shooting, I much prefer to take the men prisoners and turn them over to the sheriff and the law."

At first Lawrence could scarcely believe his ears. His creed had been force, supported by quick use of weapons, not law, and it seemed incredible to him that a man who had suffered from the raids of the cattle thieves should not take justice in his own hands when opportunity presented. But he suddenly realized that he was dealing with a new kind of man that he had never been brought in contact with, an honorable man, and his admiration for the owner of the Half-Moon increased a hundredfold.

Some time, however, was required to reconcile himself to his new scheme of life, but of a sudden he burst into a roar of merriment.

"We'll do it, and without a shot. Say, Mr. Wilder, it will break Gus' heart to think he was caught without any gun play."

"That's just it. Most of the power men like Megget have is because of the fear the very mention of their names inspires.

"But I don't mean to preach a sermon. What I

want to know is, How do you propose to capture Megget without trouble?"

"Wait till they are asleep. They'll have a celebration when they reach the mine and afterward we can hog-tie them and they will never know it."

Without vouchsafing any comment, the owner of the Half-Moon reined away from the strange guide, and, as Snider joined him, discussed the situation thoroughly.

The questioning of Lawrence, however, did not cease when the ranchmen left him. The four boys had listened eagerly, and when the opportunity presented deluged him with inquiries.

"Are there really ghosts in the Lost Lode?" queried Horace.

"None but very live ones," grinned the former raider. "Vasquez started that story to keep people from coming into the valley. Many a time we've chased men in the night when they came near."

The chums, however, were more interested in learning whether or not there was rich ore in the mine.

"Probably there is," explained Lawrence, "but it would require a lot of drilling and sinking of shafts. What silver could be got out, Vasquez has taken. He was planning to use the money from

the cattle captured in the raid to buy machinery and begin work."

Disappointed to think they would not be able to pick up chunks of the ore, the comrades lapsed into silence till Tom suddenly bethought him of the men he had seen crossing the cliff on the night of their hunting trip, and he lost no time in asking if they were some of Megget's gang.

"Must have been Gus and the boys who were with him up in Oklahoma," declared the guide. "There's a trail from that direction to the mine. Now you mention it, I remember he spoke of having seen a party of horsemen. It's a good thing for you he didn't know who it was. If he had, he was so angry at your outwitting him that he would surely have made trouble."

Further questioning, however, was prevented by the arrival of the troop at the trail.

"There are my marks," exclaimed the younger of the chums, pointing to the branches he had broken. But no one paid him heed, for with the arrival at the hills the serious work began and the ranchmen were busy issuing instructions.

CHAPTER XXIV

CAPTURING THE CATTLE THIEVES

As they wound in and out among the hills and rocks, now ascending, now going down steep pitches, the silence of their surroundings and the realization that they were bent on a dangerous mission sobered the boys and few words did they speak.

Once or twice the line halted as the leaders heard some sound that roused their suspicions, and several times Sandy and Nails dropped back. But nothing untoward occurred, and late in the afternoon they descended into the valley that was the headquarters of the raiders.

"We're in time; there's no one here," announced Lawrence after an examination of the ground for fresh horse or cattle tracks.

Remembering their guide's statement about the cliff on which the lookout was posted when the raiders were at the mine, the boys sought it with

their eyes. But though they scanned both sides of the mountains, all they could see was trees.

Horace was on the point of mentioning the fact when the word was passed back to dismount, and, leading their horses, they were soon within the protection of the woods.

"Any of the ponies likely to whinny?" asked Lawrence as they halted in a glen.

"Yes, Blackhawk," answered Horace. "It was he that gave warning of Jeffreys' approach."

"Then we'll take them all pretty well up into the woods. He won't be able to scent when he's above where Megget and the others will enter the valley."

"Which way will they come?" asked Mr. Wilder.

"The opposite end from the way we did," responded the former raider. "That's why I'm taking our ponies to a place on this side."

"Seems to me we're leaving too much to this fellow who's gone back on his former pals," whispered the owner of the Three Stars to Mr. Wilder. "It's all right if he plays fair, but if he doesn't we'll be in a pretty mess."

"I believe he is acting square with us. Still it won't do to take chances," returned the other

ranchman, and calling to Lawrence, he asked where the mine was.

"It's about two hundred yards to the right, Mr. Wilder. I'll show you when we get up on top of the cliff. There's a big dead tree in front of it, so you can't miss it, even in the night, for the bark has been peeled off it by lightning and the wind, so that it stands out like a white specter in the darkness."

Deeming it inadvisable to unsaddle the horses, in case they should need them suddenly, the cowboys close-hobbled them on a plateau to which Lawrence guided them and then followed him to the ledge.

No need was there for the tree that marked the mine to be pointed out to them, for as the men looked down each one saw it.

To the east and to the west the ledge commanded a view of the trails, and as they gazed along them the owner of the Half-Moon exclaimed:

"I don't wonder no one can surprise Megget with such a lookout. Why, it's practically impossible to approach without being seen by a man on guard."

"The only time is at night," returned Lawrence. "And, thanks to the loneliness of the place and the stories of ghosts, no one has ever tried to pass

through or even come in at night while I've been with the gang."

"Don't start talking about ghosts or you'll get us all nervous," said Mr. Wilder, fearing the effect on his men. "Now that we've seen where the mine is, suppose you take us where you think we had better wait till we make the round-up."

"That's right here," rejoined Lawrence. "We can see Megget and the others when they arrive by being here."

"True enough, but how about the guard they send up?"

"There won't be any to-night, don't worry about that. They'll be too busy celebrating your supposed loss in the fire last night."

This grim reminder of their escape caused all of the ranchers to smile, and without further objection the men made themselves comfortable while they waited the arrival of the raiders.

Huddled together, the boys sat where they could watch the trail.

Of a sudden Tom grabbed his brother by the arm and pointed to where several specks were moving.

In silence they watched as more and more came into view, and then Larry cried out:

"Here they come!"

Eager with excitement, the others crowded forward to catch a glimpse of the men who had caused them so much trouble.

"Keep down!" snapped Lawrence. "Vasquez has an eye like a hawk."

No second warning did the cowboys need, and dropping flat on their stomachs, they watched the raiders draw nearer and nearer.

Because of the cattle, their approach was slow, and it was fully an hour after the chums had sighted them before they reached the valley.

"That's Vasquez and Gus in the lead," announced the man who had forsaken his life of wrong-doing. And as the other raiders rode into sheltered grazing ground he mentioned them by name.

"There are only nineteen of them. I thought Nails said there were twenty," exclaimed Bill.

"So there were till Lawrence joined us," rejoined his father. "Thank goodness, my short-horn Durhams are all right. Now be quiet. It would be too bad to spoil everything when things are going so well for us."

Instantly the men obeyed, sitting with eyes and ears alert for any sight or sound that should proclaim the approach of a guard.

But twilight fell and none came, as Lawrence had predicted.

Sounds of revelry, broken now and then by the lowing of the cattle, were constant. In due time the moon rose and with its coming the cowboys grew impatient.

The ranchmen, however, refused to move till no sound from the raiders could be heard.

"It's midnight," announced Mr. Wilder, looking at his watch. "They must be asleep by this time. We'll chance it, anyhow. Careful, every one. Come, Lawrence."

Overjoyed that the time for action had arrived, the boys followed their guide, halting at the edge of the valley.

Ordering the others to wait, the owner of the Half-Moon and the former raider glided noiselessly toward the mine.

All about were signs of the celebration in which the thieves had indulged, and their loud snores told how sound asleep they were.

Confident the time was ripe for action, the two scouts returned to their impatient fellows.

"Pete, Sandy, Nails, Skinny, Lawrence, you take the ropes and do the hog-tying. The rest of you have your rifles ready for use. But don't shoot till I give the word," commanded Mr. Wilder.

Opening the ropes so they could use them rapidly, the men selected for the binding of the raiders moved forward, closely followed by the others, guns ready for action.

Signing to Sandy and Skinny to tie the men lying outside, Lawrence led the others into the mine.

More like a cavern did it seem to them than anything else as they cast a hurried glance about the rock-walled room which two flickering torches lighted.

Sprawled upon the floor lay the raiders, and to them Pete and Nails turned their attention, while Lawrence glided among them, peering into their faces.

Watching for the slightest move, stood a dozen of the cowboys, with Mr. Wilder and the four lads.

Of a sudden Lawrence stooped down, worked his hand rapidly, then rose, a smile on his face, and continued his search till he found another form, when he repeated the operation.

Gliding to the owner of the Half-Moon, he whispered:

"I've bound Megget and Vasquez. If they wake up now it doesn't matter."

CHAPTER XXV

HOMEWARD

HAVING made fast the leaders, for he knew that with them rendered powerless no effective opposition would be made by the others should they be aroused, Lawrence returned to the task of "hog-tying," and in a few minutes every cattle thief in the cave had been securely bound.

"Well, it has been easier to round up Megget and his gang than I ever imagined it could be, thanks to you, Lawrence," exclaimed Mr. Wilder as they left the mine to join the others.

"It was no fun at all," protested Horace, and his opinion voiced the sentiments of the cowboys. "Can't we wake them up or do something to let them know they've been captured?"

"You'd have some trouble in rousing them, son," replied his father. "They've been drinking too heavily."

"That's what," agreed the former raider. "You could ride over them and they would not budge."

"It's the only time I ever knew the drinking of too much liquor to do good," chuckled Mr. Wilder. "That is, good to us. I don't suppose our prisoners will share our opinion, though, when they awake."

When the raiders had been bound the owner of the Three Stars had sent his men to bring down all the ponies, that the animals might be relieved of their saddles and enjoy the tender grass in the valley. And no sooner had Blackhawk reached the open than he gave an ear-splitting whinny which was answered by several of the raiders' horses.

At the racket two or three of the thieves awoke and tried to get up.

For a moment the men blinked at the sight of the cowboys. Then, their senses returning, they discovered they were tied hand and foot, and in a trice they were yelling like a band of Indians.

"Go it! Go it!" howled the cowboys.

The shouts roused the prisoners in the cave, and their yells of rage added to the pandemonium.

"Come on in to see Megget," exclaimed Lawrence. "I say, Mr. Wilder, can't Larry and Tom go in first alone? You promised, you know."

Willing that his men should have their fun, the owner of the Half-Moon laughingly consented.

And with the others following close, the brothers went into the cave.

Entering thoroughly into the spirit of the occasion, Larry approached the struggling chief.

"Why, how do you do again, Mr. Megget?" he exclaimed, bowing in mock deference. "What's the trouble? You seem to be down and out. Quite a difference from when you were teasing me at that station in Oklahoma, eh?"

As Megget recognized the brothers his face grew terrible to see, and, summoning all his strength, he leaped to his feet.

But Lawrence had tied his ankles so tight he could not keep his balance, and the raider pitched forward while Mr. Wilder and the others rushed in to make sure he did not harm the boys.

At the sight of the men he thought burned, the leader of the raiders lay termbling like a leaf.

"You see you can't raid the Half-Moon herd with impunity," exclaimed Mr. Wilder sternly. Come on, boys, let's go outside. These men are not pleasant companions." And turning on his heel, he led the way from the mine.

Appointing Pete, Sandy and two others to stand guard to make sure none of the prisoners broke their bonds, Mr. Wilder ordered the others to turn in.

Some time it took them to get to sleep, but when they did they slept soundly, and it was broad daylight when they awoke.

After a hearty breakfast, they were discussing the best way to get their prisoners to Tolopah when a body of horsemen galloped into the valley.

For the moment the ranchmen and cowboys thought they were partners of the raiders and quickly they sprang for their guns. But the next minute their alarm vanished.

"It's Shorty Jenks and the sheriff of Tolopah!" yelled Skinny. And such, indeed, it proved to be, together with a score of deputies.

Hearty were the greetings exchanged by the sheriffs and the ranch owners, and the former were elated when they learned of the successful round-up of the cattle thieves.

Deeming it unwise to start to drive out the cattle so late in the day, they whiled away the time exploring the mine, where, to the delight of the boys, they were able to dig out several small pieces of almost pure silver ore.

Without adventure the day passed and at dawn the next morning the start was made.

The prisoners, their legs tied together under their ponies and guarded by the deputies, led the procession, followed by the sheriffs, the ranch own-

ers and the lads. Behind them the cowboys drove the cattle.

Able to travel faster than the steers, Mr. Wilder ordered his men to drive to the pool, picking up the fifty head on the way, after which he told them to come to the ranch for a jollification in honor of the capture.

Reaching the plains in good season, the ranchmen and the boys separated from the sheriffs and, urging their ponies, arrived at the home in time for dinner.

As they rode into the yard Mrs. Wilder greeted all joyfully. After the flush of delight at their safe return she asked about the raiders, clapping her hands at the information they had all been captured and were on their way to Tolopah.

"And now for some fun," said Bill the next day.

With riding, hunting and fishing the chums passed many happy days. At the trial of Megget and his pals in Tolopah Tom any Larry attracted even more attention than the raiders, but they bore it like sensible boys, making light of their experience at the crossing and never referring to it when they could avoid so doing.

Upon the completion of the trial, with long sentences for the cattle thieves, from which fate Mr.

Wilder's influence saved Lawrence, the brothers returned to the ranch.

Great favorites with all the cowboys, they learned many a trick of roping steers and riding, and they were never so happy as when, together with Bill and Horace, they were allowed to pass a few days herding.

Upon the return from one of these trips Mr. Wilder handed Larry a telegram. Opening it, he read:

"We arrived in New York this morning. Received fifty thousand dollars from Uncle Darwent. We shall expect to meet you at the Hotel Boswell in Pittsburg Saturday. Love. FATHER."

"It's a good thing we came back to the ranch today," exclaimed Horace. "To-morrow is Thursday, and you'll be obliged to start then to reach Pittsburg on Saturday."

"Yes, I suppose it is," assented Larry. "Still we've had such a good time we hate to go home."

"And leave the life in the saddle for life in Ohio," added Tom.

THE END

TO THE READER

Now that you have finished reading this story, we desire to call your attention to all the other volumes in this remarkable series for boys.

We feel that we have made a distinct find in Mr. Frank V. Webster, who is under contract to write exclusively for the Cupples & Leon Company. Mr. Webster's style is very much like that of the late-lamented Mr. Alger, but his tales are all thoroughly up-to-date. This author, though still young, has been a great traveler, and therefore he knows exactly what he is writing about, be it a story of city or country life, a tale of the far west, or of the frozen north.

"How can you write such fine stories?" a boy once asked Mr. Webster.

"Oh, I guess it comes natural," answered the author. "I have been through so much and seen so much, it seems as if I could go on telling stories forever."

On the following pages we give the outlines of some of Mr. Webster's stories. Read them—they will interest you.

ONLY A FARM BOY

To the lad who likes a story of country life, full of fun and excitement, we feel safe in recommending Mr. Webster's story, "Only a Farm Boy; or, Dan Hardy's Rise in Life." Dan was a poor boy, living with a miserly farmer who gave him no wages and treated him shamefully. One night the lad was sent on an errand to a distant village, and returning by moonlight, saw some men acting in a mysterious fashion in the woods. A robbery had been committed, and through a curious chain of circumstances, some thought poor Dan was guilty. But he had one friend who stood up for him—an old village blacksmith—and between them they set to work to bring the guilty party to justice and clear Dan's name.

"He's guilty, an' I know it!" said the miserly farmer for whom Dan worked.

"He is innocent, and it is a shame for you to say otherwise," declared the old blacksmith.

"Well, time will tell," answered the old farmer, and then he wanted Dan to come back and work for him.

"I'll not come back," said the boy. And then there was a bitter quarrel.

This story makes a splendid volume, bound in cloth, and is finely illustrated. The price is forty cents, and it is published, like all the other Frank V. Webster books, exclusively by the Cupples & Leon Company, New York.

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That was the question that Tom, the telephone boy, asked himself one day. It was a curious message that came over the wires, and it meant a good deal, as the lad soon discovered. What the sending of that message led to is told in detail in Mr. Webster's story, "Tom, the Telephone Boy; or, The Mystery of a Message." This is a tale of city life. Tom is the hero, and there is also a queer old fellow, Dr. Lemuel Spidderkins, who will make you roar. The telephone boy was the main support of his mother, and he had to work hard to keep a roof over the head of the family.

To the youth who wants to know what life in the big city really is this volume will prove of the greatest interest. One day we asked Mr. Webster if such a lad as Tom really existed.

"I met Tom in Chicago," said Mr. Webster. "He is as bright as a button, and I know the boys like him just as much as I do."

Like all the other Frank V. Webster books issued by the Cupples & Leon Company, New York, this volume is bound in cloth, and is well illustrated. The price is forty cents.

If at any time you want a catalogue of all the books written by Mr. Webster, write to the Cupples & Leon Company, New York City, for it. It will come to you free.

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Did you ever stop to think how strange life in a big city must appear to a boy who has never been anywhere but on the boundless plains?

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This story tells of how a poor boy joined a party in search of a golden treasure, and of how, after the treasure was discovered, a bad man, aided by some Alaskan Indians, tried to get the wealth away. Fred proved himself a hero on more than one occasion, and we know all boys will like him for that. On one occasion the youth brings down a fine moose, and on another he and his chum suffer from snow blindness and become lost in the dazzling whiteness.

This book might easily have been issued at one dollar or one dollar and a half, but Mr. Webster insisted that the price be made the same as on all his other volumes, namely, forty cents. Issued by the Cupples & Leon Company, New York, and for sale by booksellers everywhere.

THE BOY PILOT OF THE LAKES

"I once spent a whole summer knocking around the Great Lakes," said Mr. Webster, when speaking of his story, "The Boy Pilot of the Lakes; or, Nat Morton's Perils." I managed to get acquainted with half a dozen pilots, including one old man who had been at the wheel for over thirty years. They told me of many adventures they had had, and some of those appear in this book."

It is a strong, helpful tale, telling how Nat Morton worked his way upward in spite of many difficulties. There is a great storm scene, and a collision in the fog, and many other things to thrill and hold the reader. Nat was a regular water rat, and when he did an old pilot a service he was given a chance on one of the lake steamers. Another lad was jealous of Nat's luck, and he did all in his power to bring the boy pilot to grief. But Nat was on the alert, and showed what a fine manly youth he was by returning good for evil.

"That's the kind of a boy I like to write about," said Mr. Webster. "A lad who is gritty and honest to the core. I hope every boy will set Nat Morton up as his model in life."

We are certain all healthy boys will want this volume. It is well printed, well bound, and well illustrated, and the price is forty cents. Ask your bookseller for it, or send direct to the Cupples & Leon Company, New York.